This Unhappy Planet

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Marc Horne

Chapter 1

For a while there, no one wanted to play on the beach in case bits of a Marine washed up. Then came some great weather and awesome surf and so people began to agree he had been swallowed by the sea and its creatures. Life got back to normal and that's probably just how the Marine and the ocean would have wanted it.

It was dawn in California and the sun was sneaking up on the sea. Pink feathers infiltrated past Pollo Loco, a peachy haze phased through the spokes of a beach cruiser bicycle and two men in their thirties were flecked with gold as they tried to free themselves from a deep purple, surprisingly warm sidewalk outside a bar that quietly twinkled.

"I can not believe," said one of them. And he had planned to say something else. It was something about the nineteen year old in hot pants whom he had bought drinks for all night. But in the end he stopped talking right there. Because he stopped there - his brain exhausted - some strange things would end up happening to these two men.

His companion smiled a rugged smile of warm cynicism. "You can't believe? Me neither, man. Me neither."

And then two brains started ticking and a big fuzzy ocean hush watched over them and let them do it. The bar... it was gone. Just the ocean hush.

"Jack! Jack, I've got it!" said the other guy, the drinks-buying guy, and he leapt to his feet impossibly. Like leaping direct to space or maybe more like a salmon leaping up a waterfall: only impossible until you see it.

Jack, inspired, pushed himself up to a (supported) seated position. "Spit it out then Drake-o!"

Drake's wavy mane of black hair had slumped over his face and looked quite dramatic.

"I've figured out why we married those lovely ladies. Those lovely, idle wenches. You know why?"

Jack was now sitting straight-legged with his arms back, like he was taking in a band at an outdoor festival.

"No, man. I mean... yeah, I know why I did and it has something to do with someone pissing on a plastic stick. But no... I mean... hit me."

Drake raised one arm, and staggered but not enough to ruin the effect.

"Because there is gold in California but not in the hills... it's in the air now. It's in the mind. And those occasionally still quite sexy psychos are going to be the god-damned divining rods that lead us right to it. Shit, man, I'm telling you... I'm going to get that man-servant after all and it's not going to be you because you're going to be my partner, man. You and me are going to be rich and... and... special."

Then Drake called for a man-hug and with his last ounce of energy Jack delivered.

And then time skipped and it was suddenly quite sunny and people were grudgingly circumventing them. So they stumblingly followed the smell of breakfast burritos, staying quiet to avoid any mishaps on the way.

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The rest of that day was wrecked. Jack was woozy in the burrito place, admiring the way his short salt-and-pepper hair looked even better when it was all messed up. Drake was scribbling notes like crazy on a pad of paper he had bought from a school kid on the street, but he didn't want Jack to look at it until it was ready.

"You don't walk in on your woman while she's cleaning up her box, right? I need to get this stuff just right before I drop it on you."

"Is this that barely-legal-RFID.com idea again because I wasn't buying all of that 'track that ass' shit."

"Screw b-l-RFID, man. That will be my side project when I'm bored on my yacht. Look, you go home, get some sleep, get your wits about you so you don't

get shivved by one of your young offenders. We'll discuss all of this on 'bowling night' on Tuesday."

So, putting aside deep concerns about this power relationship, Jack slid off a self-cleaning stool that shone like a maraschino cherry and made his way home. There he lifelessly played with his dog and his son until he (apparently) fell asleep face down on the lawn until the little Chinese woman (definitely) came round and prodded him in the rear with a pointy garden tool and asked him where his crazy wife was. He didn't answer, because he couldn't exactly remember what she'd said when she left, or even if she'd left with a smile or a snarl.

Then it was time to eat... well... Chinese, why not, so he and Gavin picked that up, left some for Mommy and then crashed out again, this time under the watchful eyes of menacing Japanese robot toys.

Wrecked!

--

The next day began with the joy of rebirth. The lightness of limbs that didn't tremble. Blood that slid rather than slammed through the veins. And the 'web in your face' feeling that followed a night of wholly inappropriate skirt chasing? Well that was gone too.

The magic of waking up five minutes before your alarm clock did: the sheer mastery of it! He slapped that damn clock before it could even open its fool mouth, then he slid out of his bed and into his faded Cowboys t-shirt. Alison was lying face down in a silky robe with her hair twisted round her head like a wispy burqa. She was thin and tan and the nasty curtains threw that same perfect tan hue across the room at this hour and that is why he would never want to get rid of them. The curtains.

He would make her breakfast today and go running after school.

Frying eggs and half-rapping 'Sabotage' to himself, Jack looked at the side of the fridge and saw the crude sketches of dinosaurs/robots and a yellowed chart of how to get vegan nutrition and a picture of his legs wearing a tuxedo and Allie's feet in gleaming white shoes. On top of that a fresh portrait of a 2004 Toyota 4Runner in ocean blue with the optional bike rack.

You would also find this beloved vehicle in the bathroom, above Allie's little desk and pinned to the inside of the front door. And if you some how missed all of those, you'd find it taped to the driver's sun-visor of their '95 Volvo.

But it was the one on the fridge that usually caught Jack's eye because cooking time was his Zen time: the time when he turned off the engine and let his brain roll down the hill.

"Don't just look at it like that," half-barked Allie who was suddenly in the room, "Visualize it."

"How do I visualize something I'm looking right at?" he joked.

Missing that, she gave him a quick lecture. Visualize yourself in it. Visualize all the things you'll achieve in it. And most important of all, visualize all of the things you've done to deserve it: to be worthy of it.

"Are there people who don't deserve a 2004 Toyota 4Runner?" he asked as he handed her a plate of sizzle.

"Yes," she answered with a pout and a playful pivot out of the room, "Anyone who is not us."

What was it now... six years already? She hadn't really changed much, physically, other than the finest of wrinkles that you could sometimes catch sight of during a long, harsh frown. Twenty-seven.

He remembered twenty-seven because the band had finally been doing well and he had been starting to feel like the king of L.A. And, quite frankly, if you don't feel like the king of L.A., you should get the fuck out of L.A.

He remembered walking down Sunset at Sunset with his guitar on his back, when a convertible full of sluts braked to an unnecessary halt and they called out 'Superguitars kick ass!" And that was his band: Superguitars.

In the end Superguitars broke up because... well, he still was thinking they broke up as a kind of rock and roll gesture that went too far.

Man, they were tight. But not like this new band he played with (occasionally.) New band was probably a bit too tight, a bit too clinical and exclusive. A mesh

of tight guitar strings that other people couldn't really get into. They only played about six times a year, and when people came they had fun. But you could see that even as they were leaving they were forgetting. Not even a beat was carried home in their hearts.

And he was thirty-five now. There was that.

"Are you working tonight, babe?" he asked as he took the car keys off the hook.

"Yeah," she said, kind of frostily actually, "Like I always do on Mondays. I mean... get a fucking clue."

"Ok babe, catch you later."

He stepped away from that Improvised Emotional Device and just went to work. [He'd already kissed the boy and, he thought, her too.]

Then he drove to work, to teach kids who really had a shitty life. Traffic was slow and itchy. Grumpy. Red lights and middle fingers flashed in your eye for 35 minutes and you were sure you saw the same pedestrians again and again: beating you. And you hated your car and you hated California. Then the traffic lightened up you saw a tiny glimpse of the sea and The Byrds came on and you were feeling just fine and would happily accept another day.

--

"So let me throw one quick question at y'all then... who freed the slaves?"

I mean, why not? After a ninety minute lesson on the Civil War, it was worth a shot, right?

Marcus ticked his head to one side, indicating quiet confidence and then subtly raised his hand; almost so you couldn't tell. Jack had been having a good feeling about Marcus! He gave him the floor. "Marcus, you got an answer for us on who freed the slaves?"

"Yeah, Teach."

Pause.

"Deeeez nuts!"

And that was the end of that.

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At the end of the day - a day which was full of moments like that - a half-hour run at the beach felt twice as good. The ocean was just hammering the beach today, with - as usual - little noticeable effect. He could identify.

His shoes bit in the wet sand where it edged the dry. Friction was just perfect on that line.

Five hot beach-bunnies whizzed by in a single breath. Yet he could still catch a spread of freckles on the chest of one that particularly tickled his fancy. Push on, feel the burn, away from the domain of Frisbees and man-trap bikinis.

Crumbly cliffs topped by millionaires' mansions scrolled slowly past. There was no social justice in America but if there was, it was on the rare occasions that one of those mansions devolved into the ocean. But then a hurricane would strike New Orleans.

A puff of speed: he was still strong even headed towards forty. That was his edge, even when most of his friends made five to fifty times more than he did:

1) he was an 'educator,' a modern-day saint

2) he was strong but they were flabby.

It was quiet now... there were no parking lots near here. Only the hardcore, gray-haired surfers were on this beach, paddling out, looking like seals. Surfing for pure pleasure, pure rhythm, all the fight and sex gone, stripped down to what was needed to get up.

And the yogi was there: the buffed up, flop haired ascetic who was often there, like a statue in a white t-shirt and khaki shorts, in full lotus on the sands: untouchable.

Jack had not bought into much of the koo-koo stuff of SoCal, but he could feel this yogi was the real deal: that he really did have some kind of pact sealed with

the ocean that meant he had to make his devotions here.

Also, that was one hard-ass looking yogi.

Pounding stronger now, passing a young dude with white headphones. No music when running for Jack. Music was for nighttime or in the car and not when you were doing your only bit of honest-to-God living of the day.

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Meanwhile...

Drake, the ideas guy, was scribbling in a new Moleskine notebook in between yelling at people on his cell-phone and giving little speeches to his large shed full of code-monkeys.

Allie, the wife of Jack, was ironing her nurse's uniform and thinking about Mavis, the lonely diabetic who had been admitted with badly burned fingers.

Gavin, Allie's kid, was watching her from a shady bedroom and frankly I have no idea what kind of pseudo-ideas were frothing in his head.

The dog either.

The guru was thinking, "How would a wave feel if it knew about the ocean." But he was trying not to think.

Chapter 2

How do days begin?

A sun climbing over mountains?

Or two sticky flaps of wrinkly eyelid wrestling apart with a celery crunch and a flash of unwelcome light. Then flashes of age-pain.

Too negative!!! Get beyond that instant. All things age and nothing is permanent. And time is an illusion. So... things... don't age. And what's a thing, anyway.

Zen? Or not quite getting it?

Anyway, Hannah was now awake surrounded by the smells of a busy bar. A bundle of aromas tapped a telegraph message from the night before: furtive cigarettes, clinging teenage girls, multiple hot-dogs, and strangely expensive tequila.

And as she climbed out of bed, trying not to wake him, she wondered if her husband would remember half as much of his night as she had just inhaled.

Because he had staggered home at about 4:12 a.m., she'd got to sleep in her comfortable pajamas last night rather than stark-naked, so she just had to shuffle into her slippers and do a light hair de-frizzing to get herself ready to move around the house.

She looked down at him. Her eye landed on his well-trimmed beard that helped preserve a hint of a smirk even on this comatose face. Imagine what CSI SoCal could find in that beard to contradict his implausible accounts of restrained and respectable male bonding. What strands of DNA, what threads of protein, foreign hairs, narcotic herbs.

The thing they couldn't find any trace of was the hundred-thousand rocket-powered words of bullshit that had scraped across it in that "one quiet little bar" down by the beach.

Blink.

As well as the facial hair, there were his charming eyes: almond and agile. When awake they showed the powerful intelligence that allowed him to see truth and to see money and to seduce struggling designers and then trap them in expensive homes. When asleep, they were like a little boy who managed to sneak intact into the adult world.

At this high point of appreciation, she whispered her mantra "Thank you so much Drake for working so hard to give us this lovely life."

Actions make feelings.

That was her most important learning from her studies. She couldn't quite remember where she read it.

She tucked Drake in and went down to the kitchen. On the verge of that room,

the light started to flood in and the blue light of congealed sky caught your eye and after a few seconds you saw it was the ocean.

Drake had this joke that Hannah had to make sure she enjoy the sliver of ocean at least five times a day because then - assuming they stayed in that house for five years - it was only costing $20 a pop which he found reasonably reasonable.

That was one of those 'recurring jokes' and in fact if she had $20 for every time she heard it, that would practically cover her shoe budget.

Over to the stainless steel fridge, a gently humming milestone of peace before Drake and Violet woke up. Close up, enjoying the moment before she popped it open, the smooth door was her Ryoan-ji garden, her mirror that reflected nothing... so that she could see nothing.

Pop.

Out came the little glass bottle full of Luna's home-brew kombucha. Given Luna's somewhat dismissive attitude to domestic hygiene, Hannah had never dared ask exactly where she cultivated the mushroom required for this sparkly, fermented, Chinese, vinegary, tea-ish drink full of strands of obvious goodness.

She sat at the breakfast bar and there was still the regret that they hadn't gone for the darker marble. This regret belittled her daily in the face of the person she wanted to become, and yet it could not be squelched. In her defense it was in some ways a rocky crystallization of the way the decision had been made, which in itself was just a chip from a vast seam of resentment at how power was apportioned in her life.

Drake had wanted the lighter top, despite the fact that there was little reason why he should care. For a man who said "Honey, I'm just a bit too busy to think about that now," every single day it was surprising how often he would appear in the middle of a household decision, make an arbitrary choice and then insist it be so.

This decision would then typically be aired in front of other couples at a cook-out type of event. He would describe the two sides of the dispute, at first with self-deprecating "I'm just the dumb husband" humor. But the end result would be a full blooded and humiliating cross-examination, after which he would disappear and get drunk and over-familiar with one of her friends.

Perhaps, Hannah thought, they should just start playing tennis instead.

Violet was stirring. You could hear a kind of grumbling noise coming from her room, but it wasn't totally clear if it was her voice or just the sound of stuff being tossed around in the room. Either way, she was announcing to the people of the world that they should get ready to receive her.

Hannah knew she had at least five minutes before she was summoned so she opened up her organizer and checked her schedule. Couple of things lined up.

Violet came from her room with a mad brow on her. But she was still a treasure, full of surprises and bursts of deep joy. Hannah swept Violet up in her arms and for no reason that you could really put your finger on she felt her future as an old woman and the joy of a surprise visit from her daughter, all grown. As the spare key turned in the door, Old Lady Hannah looked out on a black field of cold soil full of skull-like tubers.

Ever since she was young, Hannah had occasionally flown to the future. Or maybe, ever since she became an old woman her mind had flown vividly back to her youth. When Drake was still alive. When she didn't yet understand Violet but was working on it. When California was her reality.

That was a very defiant look on Violet's face right there. Her sharp frown was square as her shoulders. She was clearly determined to win the battle... whatever battle it might be.

"I will not play with that boy again!" she spat out, disgusted to even have to mention 'that boy.'

Now Hannah tried to force her mind back: who was Violet talking about?

While Hannah spooled through an assortment of play-date memories looking for one that was more unpleasant than the rest, Violet walked over to the patio door, neatly hopping over the step and approaching a small pyramid of well-rounded, almost identical pebbles that she'd spent the previous afternoon gathering, sifting and stacking.

Both Hannah and Drake had been extremely impressed by the pyramid. Drake had joked that an ant version of Erich Von Däniken would be wondering what strange god had assembled it. He was noticeably disappointed that Hannah got

the reference. Because she was from the Midwest, he assumed she knew nothing about anything more sophisticated than 'Manwich,' forgetting that her parents were hippy dropouts and that she had been to art school. She knew all of that 'Chariots of the Gods' stuff.

Now, Violet took the stones and with extreme precision hurled them like missiles over the fence and with tiny splashes into Mrs. Kandinsky's swimming pool.

"Violet, dear."

`Splash.`

"I see that you are throwing stones into Mrs. Kandinsky's pool." [Observation]

`Splash.`

"When you do that, I feel anxious and worried." [Feeling]

`Splash.`

"Would you be willing to throw those stones somewhere on our side of the fence? Then I'll feel joy." [Direct request]

Splash.

Had she forgotten a step... she thought there were four?

"Drake said it's okay if Mrs. Dinsky steps on the stones because she never feels nothing under her waist."

Splash.

"Oh.. ha ha! That was just one of Daddy's... Daddy jokes. Now, let's have a spot of breakfast and then we can do some painting or..."

Crack. Grinding crack of glass from beyond the fence. Red blood rage. Big yells and arm pulling just below the threshold of pulling the skinny little thing right out of its socket. Kicking the pyramid of rocks into legend. Slamming the sliding door with a shooom!

Breathing. Calm. Gulping tears off in another room. Minor self-loathing.

"Sweetie, Mommy is okay now. Let's have a lovely day."

Bang bang bang bang.

Oh God, was she banging her head again? It didn't say anything in the Indigo child book that along with fierce independence, unusual perception and creativity came an addiction to brain damage. Maybe it came under the heading of Enhanced Tactile Awareness?

A huge fart flew down the stairs as clear as a bugle.

"Sounds like Daddy is up, sweetie. Let's go give him a lovely surprise!"

Little Violet stayed under the bed where she had once seen the ghost of a pueblo Indian and sucked on her thumb. Her face was empty and she finally popped out five minutes later doing cartwheels to make her dad laugh.

"It's bowling night tonight!" he announced.

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There was this couple they all knew that had 'date night' every week. Nothing would dislodge date night, other than a medical emergency. They all joked about the couple's date night at first: jokes about making first base, getting a blow job in the car, etc. But the thing was, the date night couple were noticeably, glowingly, unavoidably happy. And Jack'n'Allie and Drake'n'Hannah were in only shallow denial about their own daily dissatisfaction. So they started to feel like they should be doing date night too.

But the thought of the husband turning up at his own front door with a bunch of flowers to go an see a chick-flick had been ridiculed just a bit too much, so instead they found another way to turn the clock back: Tuesday night double-date bowling.

It was fun at first, with pitchers of beer and peanuts and stuff, but being as artificial as the 50s diner they bought their hot dogs from, it didn't take long for a Styrofoam taste to build up. The girls started to flicker in and out and then they were gone.

But the tradition went on with just the boys, simply relocated to a 'Hooters' that was close enough that you could occasionally hear the distinctive hollow clash of pins while the juke box was spinning to a different Country CD.

A drop of bar-sweat dripped down a pitcher of beer between the guys. They both sort-of were watching it, although they didn't know. When it got to the coffee-brown wood of their table the moment of silence was gone. They started drinking, and after very little small talk Drake said... "So here's the idea."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but neither of our wives and very few of their friends were born here in California. Here's something, though, that I'm thinking you have noticed. Each year that they're here, they get a little more... I'm looking for a word that's between 'spiritual' and 'weird'... anyway, you catch my drift.

"Like Luna -- possibly not her real name -- she was over at our house the other day telling me about her regression therapy and how she, after two years of concerted effort can now remember the moment of the last time she was conceived, including the overwhelming smell of SPERM! I mean what the fuck, man! Remember when she was this loveable, salt-of-the-earth, always-carries-a-fruit-knife Eurotrash girl? Don't get me wrong... I'm confident that she knew the smell of sperm full well even then but I don't think she attached religious

significance to it."

Jack took a sip and he still couldn't quite unfurl his brow.

"So what... was she like an egg or something? How could she smell anything...?"

"Maybe she was the ghost of her mother's vagina, buddy. Frankly, I couldn't stay on board that conversation much longer... we were planning to have oysters for dinner.

"But anyway, let's not get off track. It's not just her: all women who come here and have enough free-time on their hands are picking up some weird ideas."

"Guys too?"

"To a lesser extent, but the married guys... well look at you. You're visualizing stuff still, right?"

Jack adjusted his Buddy Holly hipster glasses.

"Goin' through the motions at least."

"Well, manifest us a waitress and let me keep going... I'm going to cut to the bullet points. 'Kay?"

"There's at least a million affluent or leisure class women in major West Coast cities that are buying pseudo-mystical literature or attending classes etc. They are crazy for this shit... whether it's The Secret or Indigo Kids or whatever. And the guys who come up with this stuff are doing good, but listen, the whole segment has too much churn: I asked myself, why do our wives stick with us when they are still fairly hot and we are, they say, fairly bad husbands?"

"Well, in your case I think it's the money. For me it's probably guilt about the kid."

"Dig deeper, man. They have settled in. They need stability, even the stability of our erratic ways. That's the need these pseudo-religious fads are missing out on: you buy the book once and then what... you're on your own. No new episodes, nothing more to buy. Move on to the next new gimmick. But the real way to win in this pyramid scheme is to have your own pyramid.

"Okay, I need to tighten up this spiel: I need you to PowerPoint me up.

" California women are crazy

" They seek ready-made but fresh spirituality. Like pre-washed bags of salad.

" They also crave a sense of community and belonging and predictability

" They have disposable income

" Existing churches, even the weird ones, don't mesh with their need to be in control

" If two cool guys started a 'church' in SoCal that took the best of the self-help genre and gave it a bricks and mortar presence, and then franchised that up and down the West Coast with a clear membership structure, walk-in schedules and no pretensions at all of being a non-profit, they would get rich

" Not a church: a spiritual fitness club for the new millennium."

Jack ordered Chili Rellenos and didn't say anything for a couple of minutes.

"Put that last bullet point first cause that's fuckin' genius!"

High five!

"I knew you would get it... I knew we were going to be soulmates. You're right: that's the first slide 'Spiritual Fitness Club.'"

"With all of the sticky membership schemes that implies."

"'xactly... after all, I think we'll have a high burnout rate because we are not going to go too deep with this meaningless bull we'll be slinging, so we'll need two-year upfront contracts to lock in revenue."

Jack was thinking fast now. He'd wanted to be a business-man ever since he read the first half of "Rich Dad / Poor Dad."

"So what's the next step?"

"Well, I get to work on the business plan and you get to work on the bible."

"The fuck?"

"You heard me, farmboy."

--

The news said that a boot washed up at Cardiff-by-the-sea: Marine issue.

There was a crab in it, sheltered in the bloated cow-hide and transported from the deep to the light. It blinked, so to speak, in the media flashes as it headed away.

There was no foot in the boot, not even a toe, but it was wet and fleshy enough to disgust a little anyway, especially as it was an emblem of a run from justice for a horror: a killing in a far off world that had the audacity to have a name and a face and even a law against it.

The boot would be looked at. Then the page could be turned.

The crab's moment of glory was done and he enjoyed the beach for a reckless second beneath the gulls' eyes before heading back to the abyss.

Then the boot was bagged.

Chapter 3

It's interesting to watch your wife. Getting a little notebook, furtively capturing phrases, doing little sketches of her. Combing through her web-browsing history.

Jack had had a sense of this before when he had noticed how much pleasure he took in catching sight of Allie from afar: like when they were going to meet outside a store or whatever and he would see her in the crowd before she saw him. Her big sunglasses, floppy tied-up hair, swan neck, the way she carried her handbag low like Peter Hook's bass. It was enchanting: a mix of flying over your own house in a plane and of remembering the exciting early unfamiliar days of a relationship. Cynically, also, she was not talking.

This was different, though. She was a case study and he was an anthropologist. That could be sexy too. A mud hut, the Nile Delta. She comes from the river... still wet, the drips glistened on her tribal markings.

Or, she's driving the car and a homeless guy is at the light and instead of wasting a five on him like she used to, she instead looks in his eyes for a good ten seconds and says, "You need to figure out what you really want. God bless."

Hmm. Hoboes are just not sexy... unless possibly if you're a serial killer or something.

The notebook was getting quite full in the "Manifesting" section. In a nutshell, it was quite simple. The individual determines their own reality. Not just the perception of events but the events themselves. The individual attracts events to himself via his mental attitude. Most individuals are full of unorganized, mediocre, fear-based thoughts. The universe notices this and delivers a suitable reality to them. Focused visualization can change this tragic state of affairs.

The human mind can only handle a few such visualizations at a time, but if you want it and can imagine it, it will flow across the unfinished realties and come to you.

If...

You think you deserve it.

Because, look, we all have crazy ambitions and dreams and we sometimes get obsessed with them, so why are there still stinky hoboes everywhere?

Until you believe you deserve it, it's a form without energy, a mold without metal.

And that is what would make this a killer California culture for the 21st century. Jack had it figured out: in the 60s, 70s, whatever, it was about equality. Now it was about how you could make it to the elite. More than that though: how to live in an elite universe through... what? The will?

The triumph of the will.

His beautiful wife.

Time for an hour of guitar, then off to join her in bed.

Save.

--

In the middle of the night, Jack woke up. His room was the deep purple of background radiation. Someone was in their room. Watching them sleep. Some being,

He heard a light breath just an inch from his ear.

"Oh... hey buddy, what's up? Wanna get in with us?"

No reply.

"What is it, bud? It's the middle of the night?"

"When are they going to find that man, Daddy?"

"I... which man? Look, can we talk tomorrow... I'm a little tired."

"Violet was saying they found a man's shoe on the beach and she saw it. The police were all looking at it and they were looking for the man too."

"Violet? She went to the beach and found a shoe?"

"No she didn't go to the beach, Dad..."

"Come on, get in."

--

Next day, Jack called Drake and asked him if he was into doing some stuff with Indigo Children as part of the "Bible."

Drake said that it was a great idea, because people love to spend money even more if it was possible to disguise it as being for their kids. But he was worried that possibly the Indigo guys had trademarks on that, so they might need to "white label" it.

"So D, Violet is an indigo kid, right?" Jack asked.

"Big time, per the wife. She has all the characteristics. Rejects guidance, self-confidence, learns through doing, visions... and I'm assuming a big-ass purple

aura although I don't think even Hannah is actually claiming she can see that thing... yet."

"Yeah... I guess Gavin is too but it's been a while since Allie brought it up."

"That's the thing that I think is going wrong with this Indigo Kids project. I think the original idea was to be like 'Okay, your kid SEEMS to be an asshole but that's just because he is evolved beyond you - like Spock from Star Trek,' but I hear that now they are saying, like, 85% of kids these days are Indigo. Where's the fun in that??? I was buying the pitch when I thought I was at least getting an elite level kid.

"So, I'm getting an idea: we need to trump them. Take it to the next level. 'Hey, your kid is a SUPER dick? That's because they are beyond Indigo.' What color is beyond indigo... super indigo?"

"No, violet."

"You're shitting me."

"Why would I shit you?"

"You're telling me I spawned my own little trademark! This is what They call serendipity.

"So, look, give Hannah a call and get a play-date going on one of your little teacher short-days. 'Violet Children!','The future is here and it is OKAY that it hates you.'"

--

So Jack called Hannah and she wasn't too surprised that he would ask her out and mentioned that she had a thing lined up with some school moms Wednesday and that would work fine.

Jack bounced a squash ball off the wall of his 'study.' Writers always exploit the lives of their friends and family, right? That was considered cool. And he was a writer now.

Of a bible.

--

Gavin hopped along Torrey Pines beach, singing. The sky was clear and the ocean impeccable. It brought all the surfers back. The warm of the afternoon was crouched contented on the sands and Jack crunched along barefoot on the rocks. Up ahead, he could see the impromptu camp of the moms; a flutter of paisley and tie-dye silks held down by high-end glass Tupperware full of organic salads.

As well as Hannah -- petite, pale and Irish looking as ever -- Jack could see that large German woman -- who was quite thoroughly described by just those three words -- and two tall, skinny (yet precisely large breasted) model-looking babes in arrogant jeans.

Jack threw some hugs around. And, hell, why not a couple at those two skinny girls.

Stretched out next to Hannah, just after placing his unimpressive box of sandwiches in the food zone, he asked where Violet was at. Hannah lazily pointed over at the abandoned lifeguard platform -- which sounded very Scooby-Doo -- where Violet was hanging passively as seaweed with nine feet of drop beneath her toes.

"Remarkable grip strength," he noted, half to his mental file.

"Yes. And I think she has hollow bones too, so we should be fine either way," Hannah said while popping a bubble-like grape into her mouth.

It was surprising that Hannah and Drake didn't get along -- she always seemed kind of laid back, good humored. Then again, everyone was cool on the beach: the trick was to watch them in the parking lot.

"Gavin's been talkin' 'bout Vi all morning," said Jack while checking out the two babe types. They had that pelvis-forward stance that was all the rage these days. He guessed it made your jeans ride extra-low. Those girls had abdomens made of molded plywood peeking out of there: mid century modern plywood diving into devil's depths.

"Yes, her too. They are such soul mates."

"You believe in soul mates?" [that sounded like a pick up line didn't it?]

Hannah sat up at that one. Jack half expected her to look out at the far away line that the whales would soon swim along and say 'I used to.'

Instead she said, "Yes. I mean there can't really be six billion unique souls after all."

Jack sat up now. This really touched a nerve with him because, on the side, he had been brainstorming corporate taglines and quite a few of them were along the lines of 'enhance your uniqueness.'

Then again that was just spin since they were trying to get people to sign up for a commercial cult.

"That's an interesting point,"

She raised a narrow, curved eyebrow.

"Erm... would you care to expand on it?" he asked and she dissolved into giggles.

"Sorry," she said "you just had such a serious look on your face."

"I know... typically I just talk bullshit, right?"

"No! But okay, I will expand on it. Let's say that I don't think that there are as few personalities as, say, blood types," [descending to a whisper] "but there does seem to only be one for skate-board wives" and she cocked her head at the skinny girls.

A-ha! That's who they were! Drake talked about those girls... a lot. The one with the swoop of blonde hair that swirled around her shoulder and was unquestionably, unobjectionably and ubiquitously beautiful must be the one that was married to the guy that had jumped over Stonehenge and who had made a lot of money selling his name.

The other one had a more 'European' look, like her face had actually emerged from the chance encounter of two DNA strands, rather than extensive focus grouping (like her companion's.) She had an exotic Scandinavian hiss on her consonants. However, just thinking the word 'Scandinavia' sent a tingle up Jack's leg: maybe to others it was just a light speech defect.

So the jeans did not lie. These girls were loaded, and from what Jack had also heard, they were pack-followers and totally ignored by their husbands. Jack had seen these guys cruise up at picnics from time to time. They always seemed to glide in, even though when you looked down at their feet there was not a wheel in sight.

"Babes," they would say, with detachment, and kiss them quickly. Then they would go and sit down under a tree with their baseball caps low for about five minutes while their spouses carried trays of food from Audi station wagons. Jack had joined them from time to time because, hey, he used to be cool too. It was usually a weird talk like "Hey man, how's it goin'? You're Gavin's dad, right? Cool kid. Man, I'm working hard on the new kitchen: picking it I mean. It's tough... I guess; always something, right. Okay, laters."

It all seemed a bit scripted, like they had attended 'Mommy conversation as a second language' class. Dude... I wanted to talk about skating, music or bongs, thought Jack as the skate dads slid away, checking off 'picnic' from their list.

Maybe it wasn't just the skate dads who did the quick in/out but they did it with the cold detachment of a sniper: 'Nailed the 360 wide dog, bro!' [High five.]

Jack made his way over to within hailing distance of the two wives. These women were textbook key influencers with alpha-networks. If he could figure the trick to flipping their demo to early adopters that would be some serious gravy.

"Delicious vol-au-vents," he ventured, with the direct confidence he had learned selling Amway in Texas way back when.

"Oh thanks... I was so happy they didn't flop out," replied the Scandinavian. The Blonde gave off a weakened-down hobo-deflection 'tude still, though. She would be a greater challenge.

Candy checked out this guy getting in their space. He was good-enough-looking to not be hitting on them so desperately, so what was his story? Was he a skater looking for a contact? No... too old. Was he like that guy who had that scheme selling dehydrated tiger balls?

After ten minutes of chat she wasn't sure at all, but he seemed nice enough. It certainly must suck to be a nurse like his wife. It was so much better to be

nothing, she reacted (bitterly) against her own thought. She pulled her merino-wool cardigan around herself and looked down at La Jolla off in the distance.

She was not nothing. She worked hard for the school finance committee. She was still specially beautiful. But what was this guy talking about now...?

"...I guess I think about my kids. I mean, I would never want to drag them off to church every weekend but I know it always meant a lot to me that my parents had that routine in their lives. Then again, now I think they were just kind of like sheep, you know... shutting their brains down when they went in the church door."

Where was Tommy, anyway? He could be doing something totally illegal with that awful Violet. He seemed to act extra bad to impress her. Like father like son.

Oh there he was, peering into a rock pool with little Gunnar. Watch out for genocide, rock-pool dwellers. Otherwise, low-risk activity.

Brunhilde was having a good chat with... Jack?... wasn't she.

"Ja, totally, totally. It's so hard to stay grounded when you are trying to do things differently. I mean I like to think I'm a very spiritual person but since the kids its, like... hard!!! Ha! Ha! Ha!!!"

Jack was pleased to be getting 50% response to his little fishing exercise anyway, although Candy did seem to be the richer of the two from what he had heard. Maybe the very top-end of the demographic was out of reach.

'Out-of-reach' had probably been a good adjective for Candy her whole life, right? You could tell that just by the way she shook your hand and set up a force-field at the distance of her arm with a single fluid motion. Also by the way her eyes turned off when Jack turned up... hey, stardust sparkles are not free, buddy.

Suddenly, she wrinkled her nose at him. Shit, was he staring? And what did the wrinkle mean? He turned his head around and yelled, "That you, buddy?"

"Huh?" came a young voice from behind a rock.

"Better check in on the little rascal!"

Jack clambered over the top of a small boulder and said, "Boo!"

Gavin laughed and Violet scowled, but perhaps less than usual. They were both squatted in front of a small pile of sticks, seaweed and fish bones.

"What you got cooking there, kids?" he asked.

"Dead world soup," they answered in concert.

"Whut?" he replied in his (fake) dumb hick voice as he hopped down.

Violet started stirring the soup. "When a world dies, the space gods come by and make a soup."

The soup was turning into a mix of shadows with white bits in it. Something was sticking in Jack's throat and stopping him from asking who the space gods were.

A bad vibe was bubbling up in the lava of the day. Jack stuck around long enough to make some notes on Violet and how she definitely had an aura of cold hard future about her. And for sure, if someone could convince you that was a good thing you'd pay them plenty.

Later, he found himself waking up in the warm dark next to Gavin in the boy's little bed with a crumpled-up comic book slowly printing negative super-heroes on his face. The little guy did a deep breath and then went quiet. He was planted in his bed face-down and looked as though he weighed 500 pounds. What color aura did he have? Violetish? Or was that just reflections in the atmosphere?

Creakingly tumbling out of bed with slow motion Chinese acrobat stealth, Jack could feel the light of a crackling TV off somewhere in his house. He found Allie lifeless in front of the screen, apparently poisoned by the huge Wendy's soda that lolled at her feet. She had a soft spot for Jay Leno of all things, and for big fountain sodas. So sometimes, when she wasn't careful, little-girl Allie from the past would manifest her ideal evening into out present time.

She was light as a raincoat and he carried her off to bed.

Chapter 4

Late afternoon at the hospital. The meals were done and a lot of the patients

were descending into naps. The screams and cries tapered away one-by-one until only the lady with the burned hands could still be heard and that was barely an intense groan with melodramatic inflections. On Allie's personal scale, which maybe one day she could popularize -- the McCaig-Kelly scale -- this would be a 5. The scale went up to 27 [Allie's age.]

The paperwork was in the envelope and it was time to check Mrs. Ramirez's blood sugar. She headed out into the main corridor. Her shoes were soft, warm and battered: true nurse's shoes. But everything clattered like horse hooves in that harsh corridor. Allie sometimes imagined being rushed down this corridor on a stretcher. Descending into Hell could not be more harsh or more cold. It was important, she recalled, not to attract that reality to her. So, she quickly abolished it by first visualizing an elderly Native American man on the stretcher and then slowly moving her mind back to the 2005 Toyota 4Runner.

The Native American man was something she had invented herself. It was her anti-ego: whenever she found herself visualizing herself in a dark place where she didn't want to go, the Native American man would be sent there instead.

She arrived at her destination inhaling a deep leather interior that she had found bottled in a deep old memory. She released the breath and returned to the now.

"Well, little Allie, you gonna let me outta here yet?" asked Mrs. Ramirez with a weak smile that barely shrugged open the heavy curtains of her cheeks.

Allie gave a half-smile in return. Her ice-blue eyes took a hint of mouthwash-green from her scrubs and her lips were thin and stretched.

"Well, Mrs. Ramirez, the thing is you have too many nice shoes for me to let you go losing all your toes. I really want to do some more work on coming up with a diet you can stick with this time."

Mrs. Ramirez shuffled in her bed. This was a small symbol of defiance: a protest march of sheet wrinkles. The two women talked for a while of glycemic indexes.

Would Mrs. Ramirez ever get her shit together? Allie looked her in the eyes... deeply.

Eyes are black in the middle. They have to be, to see. They hold light. Around that they are white. They reject light. In between is a ring as unique as a

fingerprint. Good doctors read the flecks, smears and spirals.

But this is just the beginning of the story. There is another light, which can't be explained by light bulbs and sunbeams. It's the light that the pictures in your mind are made of.

Allie had never seen that light more easily than here in the hospital where thoughts of life, death and the unfortunate lack of alternatives was closest to the surface.

As she walked the wards, especially at night, more and more often she saw the light even before she saw the face or before she heard the voice with its words.

She was still having a hard time with the dead eyes. Dead eyes in living faces. Feeding them almost felt a sin. Although they laughed and joked as you popped their feed-pipes in, the dead eyes told the truth.

Beyond dead, these eyes loved death and loved to spread it. They made you cold and ruined your day. And whatever light they stole from you didn't revive them a jot. Who knows where it went?

"Mrs. Ramirez," Allie began and then she stopped. Allie was still new here and she needed the money and didn't want any trouble. And she really had no idea how to save that last spark in Mrs. Ramirez's eyes. And she felt cold. So she wrapped her thin, muscly, freckly arms around herself and stood up, saying "Stick with it, okay!"

--

"I'm thinking of going back to work," said Hannah as she approached the deli counter with Luna.

Luna raised an eyebrow, but not much. Just enough, really. It was getting harder and harder to get any sort of reaction other than calm wisdom out of Luna these days.

"I thought you were having feelings like that," she replied, slightly tilting her head down and looking right down her long straight, southern-European nose at Hannah. Then she ordered the quinoa salmon wrap.

Hannah was about to say more but she suddenly had to shout, "Wait! I'll have that in a cardboard box, please. Yes, a cardboard one. You'll find them back in your kitchen. Thank you, I'm so grateful."

A couple of minutes later, her salad came out in chemically-neutral brown paper then they headed off to the lookout park to have a quick bite.

Luna stretched her arms over her head, fingers interlaced. "This is an amazing time," she said.

They were alone. Then a car parked. Two blond dreadlock guys came out of their wagon and then got their boards down.

From a cinematic angle, you would see the two ripped and stoked dudes against a forever mirror of human-sized waves flocking in. From Luna and Hannah's perspective, they were set against a background of a gnome adoring a cactus in front of a small stucco house that was worth $3M, or rather a house that was worth probably 10,000 dollars on a $2,990,000 part of the world. Occasionally, the people in the house would come out on Rite-Aid deckchairs and survey their kingdom: the ocean and the affronted neighbors. They would never sell their house. It was class war, American style. A trashy house in a paradise that the rich took too long to discover.

"They are so lucky," said Hannah.

Luna raised her eyes. "The surfers are lucky... lucky we don't rip their clothes off and ... disgrace them. And yes, the Hillbillies are lucky too. A whole ocean to piss in!"

Hannah couldn't let this slide "Luna, do you have a problem with the people who live in this house?"

Luna laughed and looked with sympathy at Hannah, ready to heal her.

"Not at all. I welcome them into my world with a laugh... a joke. This is the most intimate invitation. Have you tried laughing yoga yet?"

"Maybe. I sometimes laugh at yoga pants."

"You have to try this. Lotte's husband brought it to America. It strips away the...

the trash from yoga and takes it to the core. It's not about having biceps."

"What is it about? Laughing, of course, but ... what else?"

Luna looked paradoxically serious.

"First, you should go ahead and have the biggest laugh you ever had and then we can talk more."

But suddenly Hannah went ahead and did some fairly average crying.

The sea was salty too. How to change the subject?

"That Marine, Luna, he's not dead. Am I right? I mean... 'Marines': that sounds like they're good swimmers, right?"

"It might be better if he was dead. Those are crimes a young man might not be able to live with. His next life will give him the work of making amends. A few lives, maybe. Twelve lives... I heard they killed twelve."

"He could be innocent," said Hannah, who had removed almost all the damp traces of her implosion. The main evidence was a red nose. "The trial is still going on. The others are saying they didn't do it. It was insurgents. I think it is still going on."

Luna suggested a brisk walk on the beach, so they went. The grey, grainy sand -- always cool -- accepted their footsteps well: the only price was a slightly itchy residue.

"We always end up down here," said Hannah. She meant the beach, but Luna thought she meant this unhappy planet.

"You hate Drake, don't you?" Hannah asked out of the blue.

"Not at all," replied Luna calmly, "I think he'll make you a great ex-husband."

They had a laugh and then talked about what kind of work Hannah would want to do.

One thing was clear: a career as an oral hygienist was off the table. Hannah

admitted she had considered it for a little while when it looked like all of the girls were pulling on scrubs to get back in the workforce and Hannah realized she was too squeamish for real hospital type stuff.

Eventually though, she had actually had a dentist visit and Dr. Schumann turned to his young assistant and said "More suction please, Tammy" and Hannah realized that she was also too squeamish to even hear a phrase like that everyday. After thinking longer, she realized she was also too squeamish - or prudish or misanthropic - to be a massage therapist like Luna, although she kept that to herself.

"Would you like to go back into the theater," asked Luna, "I know you were happy there."

"I think... I think it was just a hobby really," replied Hannah with twenty keys hooping around her left index finger and slapping her palm.

"No! It was your life!"

"Same thing... back then. Oh look at the time!"

They looked at the time.

--

Ultimate Frisbee.

Jack had actually taken Frisbee 101 at college, so he was not exactly a noob when it came to Frisbee. In fact he was rather good at it. His specialty was the no-look pass. But every time he played 'Ultimate' - which generally peaked when he was not getting sex from his wife -- there was a quiet period when he stood on the grass, overlooking the bay and wondered if Frisbee could indeed go no further than this dude-ified football-clone they were playing.

Below the steep green park, beyond the party strip of PB, the ocean pinned it all down. The fleet was in town: big time. A lot of metal in the water. Not so long ago, those guys were just a bunch of clowns to Jack. These days you had to recognize that they were taking on harsh duties and solid risks. You might well believe that they were total idiots to get sucked into the biggest display of wounded national machismo since... well, there might not be a 'since.' But

regardless, they believed, they served and some of them got blown up.

"Heads up, bro!"

The Frisbee was just ten feet away, oscillating wildly.

"Frisbee, this may be your ultimate expression. It may not. But for today, it is a as good as it gets and I honor you."

Fap. He made the catch and ran with it and they went on to win the game.

Someone was having a cook-out and it smelled good. Jack was starting to prefer Tofu dogs these days and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

They were high fiving each other farewell when his phone rang. It was Drake who wanted to meet up and talk business. Jack was very thirsty so he first covered his ass, slightly, with a text message home and then cycled down to Garnet.

The traffic was stacked both ways as twilight flourished. One way was surfers leaving. The other way was people coming to party. Both directions looked pretty relaxed, Jack had to admit, as he skipped that scene on his two-wheeler. He had to concede that Pacific Beach had some pretty laid back traffic jams.

Jack had forgotten to ask Drake which bar they were going to be slamming them back in tonight. Something told him 'Vietnam Sam's': that salty, oversexed, miniskirted place. That place where Jack was sure the DJ had done visuals with napalm victims but no one could verify it.

Outside Sam's, two girls were harshly staring at each other as seagulls squeaked mockingly overhead.

"Girls. Ladies. Drinks!" he said and they turned their stares on him. Their clothes were at once clingy and droopy, their eyes jaded yet... kind of pissed. They were the kind of girls you took Polaroid photos of. As they drank with Jack and Drake, they became a kind of black mirror.

Even in the body-hot bar, the ocean air occasionally asserted itself. For Jack, who grew up in the dry, that sea smell was impressive: a pirate, a subMarine commander, a shark entered the room. Jack became alert. Looked around. Were

there more people or TVs in the bar? It was close but the answer was people. Hot girls, hungry guys. Hot guys too. Big guys too. Military big, with predatory eyes. Trained to break in doors and get everyone up against the wall. Jack was studying one guy, large and Armenian looking, when he got caught. Caught and tagged. Jack hoped that someone else would be a bigger irritation tonight to that soldier and he hoped the soldier was not here with his pack.

Then Jack thought about that attack on the village in Iraq and the trial that was still going on. Jack had nearly signed up once or twice: could have been him standing over a pit with those civilians huddled in it. And been there when the first bullet went down and cracked the man's head like ice. And he was sure that he would not have been the guy to fire the first shot. But the second? Or third? Or any of the 200 that followed. Of that, he was unsure.

This event was from someone else's past: just something he read about on the Internet. Yet tonight it felt like something in his own life, from his own future.

"Yo, Iceman," called Drake with an empty shot glass in his hand.

The girls actually laughed. They were looking super hot and restless; rocking on their stools. One had very dark and serious eyes, and she looked like she wore eye shadow on her cleavage.

They were hyped. Drake must have been telling them how rich he was: that almost always worked. The dark one... she looked... Arabic.

"Shit, man, how much did we drink?" mused Jack as he stepped up to go to the bar.

"Not sure, but I am on to my third personality which is not a good sign but... too late to stop now." Then Drake dove back into the girls.

Jack got the drinks. Jack was skilled at carrying drinks, even though the crowd was now dense and the music was getting quite dancey.

From about fifteen feet, Jack saw Drake, the two girls and an empty seat. It looked, suddenly, like an empty grave. When he got back to the table, he finished his whiskey and said. "I think I'm about done. Done with this."

Drake looked up, unsure if this was some clever 'make them beg' seduction

strategy that he would benefit from learning. "But bloodclot, we didn't talk any business. We gotta take care of business. And this thumpin' bar... is the perfect place."

A strobe light kicked in and there were suddenly, definitely, too many drinks. The awful feeling that David Lynch was directing the evening came over Jack. "Drake," he said, "let's hang later... later this week. I'm just not feeling it."

Drake looked calmly and coldly at Jack. He was a man who didn't like to have a toy taken away from him. A big played-out rap beat came on and the girls started wriggling erotically. What was waiting for Jack in the kitchen? Stereotypically dry and accusing leftovers. A skinny string of untouchability in a cool bed to follow.

Of course, he didn't plan on following this flirtatious evening all the way through to its conclusion in a bed with soft toys scattered around it and 'T-Pain' playing in the background. That line had not yet been crossed.

'Yet.' There was a 'yet' in him, he noticed. And if the only thing separating you from something is a 'yet' then what are you waiting for? Time is a bit of an illusion, after all, and if destiny can't be avoided it can be abbreviated.

The illusion of free will is a fragile one. The slight nudge from some unseen angle that suddenly tipped the table in front of him and poured drinks on the laps of the girls had more control over Jack's life than years of moral and practical learning, his religion, his society, his vows, his very sense of selfhood.

The drinks were vulgar and enjoyed exploding their colors as they hit the lip at the edge of the table which was meant to stop them but instead was the means by which they reached unprecedented heights of acrobatic grandeur.

Ultimate Frisbee.

Skintight synthetics soaked up the reds and blues: the girls looked good all spattered but they were pissed and foul-mouthed. Everyone is foul-mouthed and has a tattoo nowadays. Poor seamen. Maybe everyone has VD too.

Suddenly big, ripped army/navy/air force/Marine guys were in the mix.

"Are you fucking with the girls, you cocksucker?"

Oh, it was that guy. From earlier. And now they were on the street; all on the street together. The beat they were swimming in a second ago was just a faint pulse now. There were five enemies around them now. Ten fists. Ten big-ass feet. Jack looked at Drake. Jack knew that somehow Drake would be the one to get off lightly from this, whereas he would probably end up having a ball amputated or being told that he was a great teacher but the kids were just scared of him now.

In the hush of an improbably - but fittingly - deserted street, in the haze of being near the ocean, everybody, in their own way, got ready for the fucking up of Jack.

Chapter 5

On the way home, walking, Jack reflected. He looked at his lovely, continuous and unbroken legs pounding along. He breathed deep into his unpunctured lungs and the air happily oxygenated all parts of his brain.

A cat skittered out in front of him, then froze. Then it turned and looked up the road. Like a small loyal dog, and not at all like a cat, it accompanied Jack's steps home. There must have been something large and hungry in the alley that produced that cat.

Numerous cars passed Jack, fanning shadows that nobody needed. Half of the drivers were drunk and almost all of them would get home all right. Of course, those who didn't would have driven into a new, black life.

A police car passed him by. He could see the police inside. Two young white guys with creased faces, observing him like they were disappointed by his slow meaningless stroll.

Damn! He had left his bike locked up outside the bar. Well, never mind. He cut across someone's lawn on the corner, like everyone else did. The lawn was partially xeriscaped by edict of the people. It crunched and some little mammal skittered away. Orange sodium faked a dawn in a way that depressed anyone coming home at this hour, unless they had not expected to see a dawn. Jack maintained a spring in his step.

The screen door shivered at his arrival but he managed to keep the noise down to a minimum. He was sober, so his ears and brain were working together nicely

and he did everything right. His DC shoes were put to bed with the other shoes and he crawled in to his bed.

He lay down and looked into two surprising open eyes. Lilac lips in the night softly whispered, "Have a good night?" and there was no harshness, and there was generosity and perhaps time was reset. Perhaps this was a magic night.

Two minutes later she was on top of him, grinding him down into the mattress that was usually too springy and hard but not tonight, not now.

For a second, he was certain he was dead. That this was the blanket the angels put over your eyes.

Then another second.

Then another.

Then her fingernails dug in his chest and he smiled as he came alive all over and she smiled too.

Thank God for that crazy beach guru!

Chapter 6

It got warmer. Everyone worked hard. Tiny moths got in the food over at Hannah's house and laid their eggs. Everything in the kitchen either had to be sealed up or destroyed. Hannah was paralyzed in the garden for over an hour dealing with this. The moths left a faint dust behind when you tried to swat them. Violet told her mom that it was in fact the tiny scales that covered their wings that made up the dust. That was why Hannah went to the garden.

She could have gone back in. Thrown away some food that was suspect, bagged up the rest. Or thrown it all away, boiled everything, gone shopping. But instead she stayed and looked at her fragile garden which seemed as loosely rooted as a moss and liable to blow away like moth scales.

She should probably xeriscape. Rip it all up. Tear it out. Put beautiful rocks and suggestive cactus in. Reduce her footprint. But she didn't.

Something was impeding all of her useful destructions.

Her mind latched on to the last time Jack had been over and to something he had said about destruction.

There was something different about Jack these days. He had this aura of gratitude that was quite compelling. Hannah had mentioned this to Allie when they were out on Girls' Night Out at a Salsa club near Balboa Park. Allie had not really noticed, although they had been fighting a bit less lately. That could just be the extra hours she had been picking up and all the time he had been spending running round with that homeless guy.

Hannah was sometimes described as a good listener. She internally disagreed. She in fact possessed the gift of turning her brain off but leaving her face turned on, sensitively tuned to the other and aping their needs. The best listener, it turned out, was a mirror.

Even though she was still listening here, she did the face trick anyway to find out about the homeless guy without actually asking. Since Allie had seven years fewer wrinkles than her, she liked to keep a certain element of aloof distance in the relationship, like an older sister.

Allie said, "Oh, you don't know about Super-Hobo? AKA the Buddha of Pacific Beach? So Jack was out drinking with... uh... with Drake, I guess. And then they spill someone's drink. Or whatever. Then Jack is suddenly surrounded by a bunch of Navy guys. Then he is thinking he is going to get all beaten up and... oh isn't this just typical! First he gets himself in danger and then he is just totally visualizing and attracting just the worst, most violent outcome. But then out of the blue walks up this hobo guy..."

"Called?"

"Oh... Adam, I guess. You know, I am not judging his... hobo-hood. So anyway, he walks up. He's like this totally ripped, Jesus-looking guy and he just kind of strolls into the middle of this scene and then just looks out at the navy guys and Jack says it's like they can't look him in the eyes: all of the bad vibes start to... it's like they all sober up quick. One of the Navy guys gives Jack a big shove but then they are done and go back into the bar."

"And probably end up beating some other guy to a pulp two hours later."

"Well, yeah, maybe. But anyway, so now Jack's got this like Blood Brother!

>Snort<"

"Do they sleep in bus shelters together?"

"Honk! No!!! They're doing... y'know... Drake's thing," replied Allie.

"Drake's thing?"

Who said that married couples become over-familiar? Hannah felt that she knew less and less about Drake as the years went by.

--

Not long after that. Jack and Adam came round to Hannah's house to pick up a big pile of wood that had been cluttering up her yard for a while. They were throwing it in the back of a battered pick-up truck that had a sluttish, much-borrowed look about it. Hannah couldn't stop herself from asking what was going on. Jack replied, "We're getting to work on the soul gym."

"Hmm," replied Hannah, crossing her arms.

"Yeah... we've almost got the whole program worked out and Adam is going to be our instructor trainer so it's time to get physical. First we have to destroy!"

"Destroy?"

"The organic knitting place."

Then Violet had started crying, so Hannah left the guys to it. Allie had not mentioned that Adam the ho-buddha was smoking hot. Or at least not enough.

And now, Hannah was in her garden. And you know what... she was pissed. For years Drake had either ignored or snorted or sashimied every interest she had expressed in spiritual development. After Violet had been born, they stayed at a B & B near Julian and a strange cleansing rain had come down. The rain was completely perpendicular to the ground, and the clouds above were rolling a peculiar mauve glow around and as it rolled, sometimes the rain fell down from the sky but at others it rose from the rich, sated earth and reloaded the clouds.

They were on the patio together and Violet was asleep, storing up energy to

come alive in the deep of the night.

Hannah had the ashes of three dead religions in her. Drake was a born Catholic-Atheist, who had never believed that God had created the universe but was open to the possibility that He had taken it over at some later stage and was in the process of remodeling it, whipping it into shape and very closely watching the weird things we did. Three months into parenthood they were getting by, thanks to their copy of "The Baby Book," but tonight -- much like a real baby -- the Book had left behind a disquieting surprise.

"Drake, we are not creating a spiritual environment for our daughter. I think she might grow up with no anchor in the world."

Drake looked at her with his new expression: twin to Violet, born at the same moment, somewhere between emotionless withdrawal and mild contempt.

"So you're saying you think we should fake a religion so our daughter can grow up normal?"

"Drake..."

"Don't ellipsis me, baby. So okay, why not Buddhism then? Find us a nice quiet Buddhism. Non-vegetarian, lots of kids stories about magic deer and elephants. Sign me up for three."

She actually laughed. It was kind of funny. Drake was kind of funny.

What Hannah hadn't quite realized, then or now, was that every time she laughed at him she was losing a layer of humanity. He was clinically butchering. He was desensitizing. All emotions got the sarcasm stun gun. He stalked her heart for years, rehearsing how to kill it like a kitten and she didn't get it.

Also, maybe he didn't get it: he perhaps thought he was a normal guy. A good guy. He was rich and provided employment to many dead-end characters and his wife did not have to work and he was discreet. Not the best guy, not Superman. But a good guy.

So they both didn't get it: the mutual S&M spiral of sarcasm. So Hannah smiled a little at the bitter irony of this new adventure of Drake's: he was going to sell spirituality like he sold spy ware.

--

Jack was feeling good and firing on all cylinders. Things were coming together as fast and easily as they usually fell apart.

He was sitting in the staffroom at the premier branch of "Totally Real" with Adam. A short while ago this had been the sad overstocked remains of an organic knitting shop. "Someone's dream, I guess," he thought. Now with his own two hands and with a bunch of favors and the help of unofficial employee number zero, Adam the beach guru, this was a fully operational short-term solution to middle-class new-age existential challenges.

The yoga studio could be heated to cookie-browning temperatures, but at the instant they saw the fad for sweaty yoga flipping, a switch would turn it ice cold.

The tearoom had been scrubbed, sanded, padded and clothed until there were no angles left. This jellyfish dream of a room was decorated with slightly obscured but suggestive metaphysical art. Was that the face of John Lennon? Or Gandhi? Or a fluffy cloud?

Jack was very proud of the paint job. One of the arty girls from his class had put that together for like $50. She wanted to do it for free. But Jack felt that the fifty was good karma.

The tearoom was where people could drop in to 'connect.' There would always be a 'spirit guide' on duty to keep the focus on growth, positive visualization, the joy of the present and all of the other stuff that Jack had written in his little purple notebook: the distilled spiritual juice of a hundred happy hippies.

The rest of the building was filled with rather small meeting rooms where more personalized, higher cost, scheduled enlightenment classes would take place. Color theory, Tibetan Buddhism, Kabbalah, Emotional Freedom Technique, etc. The difficulty had not been in finding stuff but in filtering out the quality. The talent pool was immense and very cheap.

Quality control had indeed been the big issue. Was Rachelle, the grey haired expert on Non Violent Communication a better asset than the slightly hotter, blazing eyed soccer mom Tracy? That was where Adam had been invaluable. At first he had wanted to keep himself to himself: in exchange for a place to sleep in the caretaker's office at 'Totally Real' he worked his ass off building the place,

and that was his thing. But the talent was drawn to him, it seemed. They would strike up conversation with him while Jack went to get a pot of tea ready or while they were wandering around the joint trying to scope out its ley-lines or whatever.

The intensity of his silence and the gravity of his listening brought out torrents of words and concepts, flashes of emotion and bursts of frank cynicism. Jack would stand by and watch it happen time and time again. This enigmatic, calm man in paint spattered overalls would utter a few words, curl his moth toward the edge of expressiveness and Jack would quickly learn who to hire and who to henceforth avoid in the parking lot of the vegetarian food co-op.

"Dude, what is it with you? The wise souls all want to chat you up."

Adam laughed without a noise. "Oh, I dunno. I'm a good listener, right? Maybe people who want to change the world are drawn to that."

Driving home that night, Jack thought about changing the world. He looked down the freeway ahead of him, a lava river of taillights almost cooled to rock, and he wondered if he was accidentally doing something good here. Jack was beginning to think they had created something bigger than they had intended: a bubble-headed speaking platform for an esoteric culture that had previously lived encrusted in strip malls. The strip malls that served coastal housing as densely packed as favelas but built on solid money, not trash.

On reflection it seemed unlikely that an idea born in the deeply drunk, reptile banker mind of Drake could positively impact the world, but on the other hand he himself had done most of the work and made the calls on the staffing [other than the yoga and Pilates squad who had been hand-picked by Drake and resembled the Dallas Cowboys cheerleader team with bindis on their foreheads.]

Maybe... maybe this huge crush of people who were living the California dream could start to create some kind of California reality if it became as easy to contemplate and to grow as it currently was to get a nice haircut.

Yes, Drake was the bad angel on his shoulder but maybe Adam was the good Angel on the other shoulder. And perhaps the formerly fundamentally harmless Jack could make the leap to something else -- something good.

--

He arrived home, where life was waiting... cold.

"These burritos are delish, babes," he floated, under the rose painted lampshade that crowned the dining table and always gave dinner a poker game ambience.

"Hmm," snorted Allie, ambiguously. Jack retreated from the ambiguous snort, Seussian beast, and turned to Gavin who was eating vigorously for a change.

"Finally found something you like, huh, kiddo?" Jack said with a smile.

"Don't," said Allie, through ice or through glass. Allie hated it when Jack tried to coach Gavin at mealtime. In fact she hated Jack to make any expressions of judgment about the food. The thinking was that if they all just quietly ate their food in the manner of monks and didn't get words all over their taste buds the dinner would go better and bedtime would go better and life would go better.

Jack would formally thank Allie for the meal at the appropriate later time.

It was hard for Jack to be quiet at dinnertime. Since the night when he had not had his skull beaten out of him there had been long weeks of his teaching job (since they agreed he shouldn't quit yet) and the business ("Drake ass-raping you") and Allie's draining shifts at the hospital. The happiness he had felt that night was fading away.

Or had he imagined that? That happy night and the happy breakfast the next day where she had poured his milk and he had made her tea? Or was it real but just afterglow, now almost exhausted?

"Working tonight?"(Just slipped out.)

Silence resumed.

After dinner she revealed to him that something rather awesome had happened. The Toyota 4Runner had manifested, along with the $9000 in the bank she had been visualizing.

The mutual manifestation had taken place via the cyberplasm that is Craigslist, and the holy harvesting would take place at 3pm the following day in Chula Vista.

She left for work in their old clunker for the last time. Jack watched her go.

When she manifested something for which a pop-up menu did not exist, then he would be impressed. Did she really think she had just done something magical? Was she taking all this junk seriously? Was he doing something bad by creating a chain specifically designed to lock gurus and weak-minded people in small and serene rooms together?

But before he went to sleep he couldn't stop himself from imagining the perfect opening day and the rich, thick, magnetic aura of success spewing from his Polo shirted self.

Chapter 7

"... and 6 and 5 and 4..."

and finger countdown and go!

It was TV time for Jack. Drake wanted to stay off camera and Adam wouldn't even come in the building. So today, Jack was the face of 'Totally Real' for five minutes of 'San Diego Living Today.'

In his sky-blue polo shirt, with his long and half-amused face and ice colored eyes and hair that looked good always (no matter what dumb style he had put on it over the years) Jack was made for TV.

"And with us today we have Jack Kelly, co-founder of 'Totally Real,' San Diego County's new 'spiritual fitness club.' Jack, that's a new phrase to me... 'spiritual fitness club'?"

"Hi Austin. Yeah, 'Totally Real' is definitely something people haven't seen before. The way we look at it is that these days it's easy to find a place to improve your body but working on your spirit should be just as accessible. We have created a place where you can drop in on your own schedule and explore spiritual training at your own pace and without having to belong to any particular creed or cult."

"Sounds interesting! So you have one North County location, right?"

"That's right. Our Encinitas location opened up last month and we plan to open

our second location in Ocean Beach early next year."

"And so what is it that people can learn about at your... school?"

"Well we don't think of it as a school. It's a place where you come to give your soul a workout. So you might want to come in and start to work on vibrational living and figure out how to move away from good luck/bad luck cycles. Then you might get into a one on one session of past-life regression and then finish off with some hot yoga and a smoothie. Like going to a gym and hitting all the best machines, but with highly trained, compassionate spiritual counselors and a low monthly fee."

Well, it hadn't gone too badly. The polo shirt had set the frame of reference - along with the lavish potted plants, the amount of give in the chairs and the high quality of the pre-segment donuts. Jack basically just had to pour his messaging bullet points into that soft-sell advertorial world and hope for the best.

Since they were downtown, Jack said, "Hey let's go to Smokeez," and the other two, who were always hungry didn't verbally agree but did instantly get in his car.

--

Smokeez was half full. Its walls were Mexipunk collages and naturally loaded with plenty of skulls and dark haired, full-breasted women with thick black eyelashes. Everything in the restaurant had a scribble or a statement on it. Tattoos seemed to pour off the arms of the hung-over servers and slop in sticker form across the tables and fritter down the walls as sharpie graffiti. The jukebox had a fake moustache and the complete works of The Clash.

Backstage, vegan and carnal chorizo sizzled side-by-side in perfect harmony while the artistic young Mexican dudes socialized wordlessly and suicide girls with tattooed sternums (that had perhaps never been covered up since the day they were inked) brought dishes to tables with the urgency of a majestic California redwood thickening its trunk.

Drake did not respond well to the awful service, and felt trapped in glass. He futilely tried to seduce the servers so he could get a chip refill faster and also, hopefully, screw them at some later date.

"They do know this is not Manhattan? I don't need to get pissed upon to feel like I'm in 'the place-to-be'. I mean... 500 Mexicans have illegally crossed the border just while I have been sitting here looking at these useless chip crumbs."

Fractal triangles sat in the salt, affronting him. Jack still laughed at Drake's jokes. Adam didn't laugh, but his aura was refractive: other people's moods entered it, bent a little and came out pleasingly different... like they had meant something.

"It's inspiring in a way. If a business like this can survive then I think we have a very good chance..."

"But anyway, I'm going to ignore these stabbing pains in my stomach and turn to the real reason I called you all here. I'm looking at the numbers and I see us slowly shuffling up to 'break even' territory... but that's it. I'm worried that there is no growth potential. Jack, what do you think? Are we getting a lot of people kicking the tires? Are people getting word-of-mouth or do we have to blow money on advertising? Assuming your virtuoso appearance on brunch-time TV doesn't 'go viral.'"

The undercurrents of the conversation entangled, made a rip tide, and silence fell.

"The chips are here," Adam said. They ate some.

"Well, we are getting solid foot traffic... much better than we expected. And lots of word-of-mouth. Lots of friends of friends," said Jack.

"And who is coming in? Dirty hippies who want someone to talk to, or our target affluent housewife demo?"

"Both. 50-50. More on the hippy side, I guess."

"Shit! What's the breakout play!? I want those rich chicks you were talking about! The X-Housewives... the BMX babes. They are alpha networkers! We get those girls on board and we are golden."

Phantasms of these women flickered as candles in their minds. They tried their best to read them, deconstruct and program them. Drake and Jack did so anyway. Adam was still just watching.

At the surface, the targets were just hot moms in their thirties who dressed a bit urban. But they had some other distinguishing features. They were cold, distant... except with each other. Their faces were mask-like immobile: possibly this was just the price of the year round golden tan and the risk of a sudden, catastrophic wrinkle avalanche.

There was a calm, swan-like or catwalk-like manner about them. They seemed to expend no more energy in moving from Land Rover to classroom door than it would take to nudge an empty skateboard across an empty concrete rooftop parking lot.

"I mean... who are these girls? Not now, now their husbands have the big shoe deals: who are they really?

"What kind of chick does a skateboarder or freakin' extreme windsurfer or whatever marry? Or date... screw, until he ends up marrying one just out of boredom or lack of attention. Pretty girls. Groupies. Sluts. Whatever. They like a good time: smokin' dope, orgies on the beach."

Jack stared at Drake: amused and impressed. Drake was practically in a trance, divining or maybe creating the women. He was no longer in Smokeez, awaiting the invention of the burrito. He was in a sea of inductive reasoning, pulled ever on by the gravity of money, by a shoal of mermaids.

"So they are nouveau riche! It's just as simple as that really. It's easy. That's why they are always helping out at the kids' school. They want to be philanthropists! They want to be like the First Lady or something. Ok... so here's the plan. We hold a big fundraiser for something that they really care about. They get involved and invite everyone they know and pretty soon we have the wife of everyone who ever made a living nearly breaking his neck - both big and small - right at our school getting converted. I like it. This is a good plan."

Jack waited a second or two for a 'What do you think?' but then thought better of it and just said, "Sounds like a plan."

"Adam, young man, I'm going to need you to be on top form that night, seducing the ladies."

"Why would I want to be involved in this?" he asked and both Drake and Jack were a bit surprised.

Adam had just been uncomplainingly working his ass off for months. He labored on the storefront, he interviewed staff with his gentle and infallible bullshit detector. And whenever required he would even do sales for them: they would put him out in front of a doubtful prospect and he would just ask a couple of questions like 'What are you looking for ' and 'Am I hearing that you want some help to find that?' and almost always the sale would be made. Jack and Drake had both tried to put that in a bottle and script it, but no one else seemed able to pull it off. It was that intangible authenticity that Jack had first noted on the beach and that had saved him from a brutal ass-kicking outside the bar. He seemed to without agenda: so if he asked you a question, it needed to be asked and you had better have an answer.

So now there was a question sitting there in the restaurant booth.

Drake reacted badly: "So now you are smelling a bit of money it's a different tune with you, huh? Food and a place to stay not enough for you anymore? Well fuck you, Jesus!"

Jack's jaw dropped: the other thing that he had always noted about Adam, although he had never really verbalized this even in his internal monologue, was that he gave off a solid vibe of being a reformed man of violence with too much blood on his hands, even though he was a young quarterback-looking type. You would never want to fuck with him, basically. Jack had met a lot of guys like that when he was working the oil fields outside Houston. Way too chilled out, way too detached from the daily BS. Burned out but still not to be touched. Drake on the other hand was the kind of guy who had probably never had a fight with a male person.

"That's your answer? I'll ask Jack instead, then. Jack... why would I want to be involved in this?"

"I think it'll be fun and then we won't have to do sales anymore and can surf instead."

"Thanks. And I thought Drake was the businessman."

Drake was pissed and would remember this day for a long time. He looked up and the waitress seemed to be sneering at him. Well, she was and always would be. But he took it personally.

Through the hole she had made in her earlobe, one could see a patch of blue sky. Adam looked at it for a long time and a haze of memory, a haze like you see on a hot roadway struggled around him. He closed his eyes and put himself in the now. Things that had to be removed in order to be 'in the now' were hot sand turning brown and holes through people filled with little bits of sky.

Chapter 8

The child was released from her five-point safety belt and accompanied with a carefully held hand across the small parking lot. Her belly was full of organic oats, cooked in reverse-osmosis filtered water. Her small rosy cheeks were well guarded against the warm afternoon sun. And the place she was entering now, well inspected by the local government and full of sensitive and caring people, welcomed her with the scent of rose petals floating.

And yet, her mother was extremely anxious at the thought of leaving her here. This was because she could not help but be concerned about anything that her husband Drake was involved in, and the "Violet Children Learning Realm" fell in that category. Her child often seemed like a toy for Drake... or a pet. He did things like tell her to go up and hit other children, which reminded her a lot of when they were in Little Tokyo and he had given a waiter fifty dollars to pull one of the crabs out of his tank and throw him in the eel tank and create a kind of spermy explosion of wriggling.

'Totally Real' was fairly busy. Hannah put aside questions about how much of her money had been sunk into this bizarre and totally cynical venture. A strange looking woman was staring wordlessly at her from behind a twinkly crystal bead curtain with eyes like in-sink-erators. They pulled in, offering help but you knew that you had to watch your fingers. The woman extended her arms and her plaited blonde hair tumbled off her shoulders in waves and wakes. "Welcome beautiful ones. I am Falacha!"

Oh. That was the teacher then.

She came out through the bead-curtain waterfall and Violet seemed to be entranced by this not-un-Disneylike entrance.

"Let me see you, little one," she said while ostentatiously closing her eyes.

"You are closing your eyes!" noted little Violet, slightly disapprovingly.

"All the better to see you with. To see the colors of your life/To breathe the colors of your why/To listen to the rainbow of your mi-ee-ind."

Hannah rolled with it. Even though she knew that the Violet Child concept had been born in a bar, she also knew that it was just a rebrand rip-off of a movement that was already going on in the world and that really fit in with what she was seeing with Violet. She had a friend up in L.A. whose son had been put on an Aura-Based learning and that friend's life was much better and she was drinking a lot less.

"Now, why don't you go in and play with the other little ones, my sweet. They are making a little castle." Violet disappeared through the waterfall.

"What a marvelous aura," whispered Falacha warmly in Hannah's ear "We are truly blessed to have such future leaders and world-changers in our midst."

"Yes," (both sincere and not) "and - Falacha, was it? - what will Violet be doing at class today."

Falacha's face became rather serious. "I cannot wait to find out," she said.

Hannah wandered out into the parking lot. She had a couple of hours to kill and felt like a coffee maybe.

"Hey Hannah," called out Jack from not far away. They hugged and he asked what she was doing there and she filled him in.

"Oh... the Violet Child thing starts today, yeah. What do you think of Falacha? She's totally... into it, right?"

They both laughed and then Jack tried to be serious. "I mean... she's cool. I think she really can see the auras and stuff, y'know. We had some total fakers in for interviews.

"Falacha isn't her real name, y'know," he said and they were laughing again.

Jack accepted her invitation to take coffee: she got a coffee with a lot of provisos and his was more regular and they sat down on a couch at Starbucks to enjoy them. (The verb 'drink' was in slow decline.)

"Thanks, by the way," Jack said, over the lip of his mug.

"You're welcome. What for?"

"The party thing. I know it is going to be a shit load of work but I think it is really going to pay off."

Hannah contemplated playing it cool, but decided that Jack wouldn't mind too much if she lost her shit.

"Fucking Drake! It would be too much trouble to tell me about this. He would have to stop talking about the new TV he wants for a second or giving me shit about that pair of pants that I didn't get enthusiastic about. Or even stagger home while I am still awake."

Jack said "Yeah. I guess I should have figured that you would have not a clue about this."

Jack detailed it as best as he could. Imagine a party from the TV soap opera Dynasty, which Drake imagined to be a cultural touchstone for his target 'demo'. Then make sure all the food was fair-trade-organic-vegan-gluten-free. Get a dude with a sitar, some dancers. Make sure all of the rich, cool girls within 20 miles who had ever unrolled a yoga mat came. Then make sure all proceeds went to the most right-on charity around. Like taking blind kids surfing or whatever.

In 3 weeks.

"I guess you're having a stroke," was Jack's closing remark.

"No. I am frighteningly calm."

"You know, I think you... we... can do this. This is like a defining moment in taking hold of our reality and just making it happen," said Jack and it came from the heart and you could tell.

And Hannah suddenly noticed how glum Jack had always been. Yes, he and Allie were the cutest couple in town and always hanging or sitting on each other. And he always had the laid back, Paul-Newman-in-Cool-Hand-Luke thing going on. But looking back, he was a guy who was always kind of looking forward to

bedtime. And now here he was, talking about taking hold of reality. Here in this coffee shop, literally crawling with germs and viruses: where a man had just come out of the restroom without using a piece of toilet paper to open the door, and he was sure that he... she... they could make things happen.

"Ok. You're right. It seems like a challenge to get this together, but maybe it is my turn to get lucky. Or not lucky. Like you say: define my reality. I can make this party happen, make the rich girls come and love it, turn on hundreds of people, get rich and better the world."

High fives!

Meanwhile, while her husband was on the cusp of a

pseudo-romantic moment, Allie was emptying out some biohazard boxes. This was part of her job that she enjoyed, actually. Perhaps it was the mysterious biohazard symbol. She had heard that adopting a sigil could be a useful visualization exercise. You created the symbol for certain situations where you needed immediate help. Like you could make a sigil for "health" and you could imagine it quickly when a guy started coughing on you on the bus. She decided to use the biohazard as a sigil now when she met a particular infectious patient.

She left the dirty sharps room and went back on her rounds. It was hot outside and the sky was bullying the windows to get in. But they kept it cool and dim inside. Allie was happy to be a nutritionist. Even though her work was hard and underpaid, it was where she wanted to be. She had been thinking about food her whole life it seemed. More than other people, that is. Not just thinking about stuffing her belly but thinking about what not to eat. About a diet of subtraction, not endless addition. What was the minimum dependency you could have on gross carcasses, mucus discharges and balls of rotting starch? She did not believe in breatharianism: that was just stupid. Besides she had tried it a couple of times. But she had looked at her Dad one time when they were at a party and he had the surprise discovery that the hosts had laid on a 400lb pig-roast. He was beyond excitement; he was in a state of anxious panic. He had not been informed. He had eaten a sandwich just an hour ago and had not recently voided his colon either. He started to sweat and make endless jokes and comments about the size of that thing. He was by the side of a pit like some hypnotized cobra swaying, breathing in the aroma. She munched on a carrot and imagined him diving on the beast, tearing at it, rolling in the fire pit. Later this imagination expressed itself

as a certain expression on her face, which magnetized a rude punch to her abdomen that her Dad didn't even bother to apologize for this time.

Then she left home a few years later and wandered over to California. She almost made it to L.A., where she thought she could have been an actress. But she ended up staying with a guy in San Diego for a couple of months: he was a nice guy who basically left her alone and got her a job at a coffee shop. She would make these huge sandwiches there, topographical snacks. She served one to a French tourist once and he practically dislocated his jaw trying to take a bite out of it. If you have to stake a sandwich through its heart to keep it in one piece, that sandwich is maybe too big.

Those were confusing days. She kept on just finding herself in places. Once it was in bed with a well known DJ on the thirtieth floor of one of the big downtown hotels, watching a cruise liner inch, or millimeter, its way into the city: it looked like it could have cruised right through downtown if it wanted to, scooping up America's Finest Hoboes and half a dentists convention and taking them out to the desert, eventually.

Another time it was a homeless shelter, where no one, herself included, was clear on whether she was volunteering or checking in.

In her mind - which was her anchor even though in this case she accepted it was factually wrong - she was pregnant before she even met Jack. She certainly never remembered any good, romantic exciting times, although she did have some photos. It was like she turned pregnant and manifested this grey templed man-child to be the Dad. They spent all their time at the beach, with the baby bundled up in a sling attached to one of them, as a kind of buffer from the other. As time went by, he disengaged a bit more. First it was the Frisbee, then the alcoholism. Now it was this business. He was reclaiming his time, he was diversifying his relationships. It was normal and healthy. Sometimes they sat in the same small room in their shack-like home while he listened to some music she would hate on headphones plugged into his iMac. She knitted, and inside hoped he would take the headphones off and listen to the music of her voice and all of the love that she was capable of, if asked. Because she had dreamt of love throughout her whole dusty life and kept the dreams like a chicken keeps her eggs, even the barren ones. Instead his face became covered with static and dust.

Now she was a nurse and an adept at visualization. She walked on soft white

tennis shoes and when she saw them she felt happy to be a nurse. It was time to give Mrs. Lopez a shot.

Mrs. Lopez was in her room and the flowers were dead next to her. She was reading People en Español. The room was a pleasant lilac. The shaded window hummed a rich thick amber. Mrs. Lopez looked over at Allie as she stepped forward. Allie, the good mother and hard working student and would like to be a great wife. Mrs. Lopez looked at her. Allie looked back and the thing happened. The thing was this new thing in the last couple of months where she would look at someone's eyes and see light there. Or not. The light was your will to live, your sense of your worth. When they went black, usually the patient would soon die, Allie had noted. Mrs. Lopez' eyes were as black as her thick hair. Her lips moved a little, like bananas full of maggots. She tried to mumble a few words. She had cancer and diabetes and some kind of parasite that they couldn't quite figure out. Allie sat down on Mrs. Lopez's bed, and creases spread out from her boney backside. She looked deep in to Mrs. Lopez's eyes, which spoke to her. The blackness was the before and the after. The blackness was the parasite. The black hole that hated the abundance of the universe. It was scarcity: the great illusion.

Mrs. Lopez tried to speak again. No words came out, though. Allie saw the many words of People en Español before her: just a fuzz though because she didn't speak Spanish.

There was no point fighting it, was there? Allie stroked Mrs. Lopez's shoulder and gave her the shot that the black eyes demanded.

Chapter 9

Summer break time was almost over. Now, back to school and then the holidays loomed. First Halloween, the devilish throat clearing. Then the serious holidays, the months of nothing done. You could feel them tugging already, trying to gatecrash summer. One day, another holiday would appear in September, like a great crack coming through the calendar. It would be in the latter half of the month, as September 11 had ruined the first couple of weeks.

The end of summer fun, and the looming end of year mixed up inside people. They looked seriously at invitations that arrived out of the blue. Hannah had been working like a devil to get in everybody's inbox or doorstep. Her

experience with missionaries came in handy. You had to go at it with the attitude of eternity on your side. Perhaps you wouldn't get a conversion that day, but by the time all the lights went out, you would have the right people on board. Candy was on board. Ha. She was the wife of a skateboarder. If you were laughing to yourself about jokes like that, you were tired. Probably too tired to be making raw spring rolls on a marble topped island with the moon dripping through the skylight in your kitchen. Hannah had been thinking intently of the party for several weeks, to the extent that sometimes she had thought it had just taken place. In fact it had only taken place for a cast of Barbie dolls in her head. With unbending legs they had shuffled around a selection of gurus and goat cheeses. It had all gone terribly well, and money came pouring in through the windows. But then Drake started talking about his desire to be a space tourist. Then she was brushing her teeth: icicles of time were dropping out of her night, but that was Ok. It was more efficient that way. Then she was in bed. Drake let off manly alcohol fumes. In the other room, Violet debated with a dream in the night. What would happen after the party? More time dropped away. Too much. She was at the party now, it was really happening. Legs were bending now as the beautiful women walked around, and the food had real textures and smells that took you in their caves. And at her feet was a broken champagne glass and in front of her was Allie with the strangest, most defiant look on her face. But everything was not ready yet, everything was not prepared. This party could not happen yet and no she would not drop a champagne glass and what the fuck was Allie doing.

She willed herself back through time. She was back in the too dark bedroom again, with the smells and the sounds and her own sense of gravity and of where her limbs were. This was almost as good as sleep, she supposed.

For some, the night lasts minutes; for others, many, many hours. But the sun does not agonize overlong on how to reconcile all of these experiences: he just flies over the horizon like Superman whenever he feels like it. And so it did come to pass that it was the day of the big fundraiser party at the campus of "Totally Real." Jack and Adam hit the beach for a long hard run to get things started. They headed north on the cusp of a low tide. It was hotter than expected: perhaps a Santa Ana was blowing in some desert heat. There was dust and grit in it too, but Jack was used to that from back in Texas.

"Hey buddy," he spoke with only surface thought and motivation "where do you come from anyway?"

Adam paused longer than you usually need to in order to answer such a question. Maybe he was some kind of army brat or something who moved from state to state.

"I don't really talk about that," came Adam's reply. He kept looking fixed north, although they were running through a thick band of nothing in particular.

"Sorry, man. None of my business," Jack replied, a bit worried that he was going to get a blast of bad karma aura.

"No worries," ran Adam.

Then after five more inky blue waves had crashed by their side, he spoke again... which was unusual.

"I come from where I am at, y'know. That other life... I accept its karma, but that's it. It's a small closed room."

Then some pelicans jetted along past them and Jack's legs felt heavy. In fact everything felt heavy and hard when you saw those beasts gliding by, riding currents that had no equivalent in the staggering life of the stilt-legged humans.

An itchy thought finally got a color after sitting invisible in Jack's perception for some months now. Was Adam's 'presence' a trick of the light: was it a fragile fantasy that could be popped if you pushed your face against it trying to look to the other side. Because frankly, without Adam the whole school would fall apart. The teachers were all flakes or unimpressive journeyman. The only one with charisma enough to be the next Bikram Hot Yoga or whatever was Adam. Even if he was shy and wouldn't talk to even the guy from the Coast News, Jack was copping moves off him anyway, and Adam charged up all the teachers and made them up their game and really believe that they could dominate reality.

Jack wished he had kept his fool mouth shut and not asked a single question about their Santa Claus.

He pushed a bit harder to get in front. Adam met the challenge easily. Adam was super-fit, in the way that you don't get just by running down the beach or doing a hardcore Ashtanga session. His forearms were cut, and had kind of the look of an Easter ham. You could imagine him pounding a speed bag.

"Did you use to be a fighter or something?" Jack asked and then he bit his tongue and wondered what the hell he was doing. He planned an apology, but before he could get it flowing Adam came back with a reply that was too tight to be sincere, but Adam was always straightedge true.

"I was born on this beach."

--

Drake was among his code-monkeys. He kept them in a shed. They were on India-level wages, but didn't have to get cholera and had enough cheetoes that he needed to buy them all a new keyboard every 2 months so they were well off: that was how he looked at it.

Drake caressed his chin. The code-monkeys were making him good money still, but he had an expensive divorce in his future that was for sure. Hannah was not good breeding stock. He loved Violet. He loved her fire and her fight and focus. But she was also a pain in the ass and she lived in a world of her own most of the time. He had his mind on a more solid, golf-playing son. He did not see Hannah delivering that to him, even though she kept her body clean by avoiding all unnatural substances. She was a fragile beauty, and she couldn't keep up with him. He had a sturdy young teacher of equestrianism from Del Mar in mind for bearing his next child. They were just at the flirtation stage at the moment because he wanted to keep their affair fairly short before they went kosher. He was sure that she would not marry one of the polo players in the mean time. He kept her warmed up at the polo club with talk of money. So he needed more. And he genuinely believed this hippy trap was genius. He had tentative financing lined up for five of them up the west coast. He had his backer coming along to the party, and all the backer really needed to see was that people with money could be duped as easily as hippies who spent more on cat food than personal hygiene and then the deal would be in and Drake finally appropriately rich.

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The afternoon passed calmly. The cars tamely shuffled around and children came home from school and Dads did too and some babysitters turned up, ushering in the early evening. One hundred and ten people got ready for Hannah's party.

Auspiciously, the sky started to turn violet just as Allie got in the car. She waved

to Gavin who was at the window of the neighbors' living room right now, playing with a gigantic, compassionless robot. Allie visualized a peaceful evening for him, free from tears and anxiety, and that his imagination would be sated by ceaselessly focusing on the planet Cybertron.

Hmm, that was an interesting question that maybe she could ask someone tonight down at 'Totally Real': if one visualized another planet intently enough, what did that do? Did that create the planet? There were literally millions of kids who spent massive visualization effort on Cybertronian politics, mores and even the geography of its scarred surface. What the hell was that doing to the universe?

Wait... was that how God was born? Was that the basis of Heaven? Did a billion souls live on in some vast global dreaming? Dead souls, like parasites on the living floating in our collective and well-groomed fantasy.

Her head was spinning as she hit the freeway with these thoughts. As such, along with the work that she was doing to protect Gavin, she realized in retrospect that she had been very distracted that night and not protecting herself hard enough and not maintaining her reality well enough. And thoughts of Mrs. Lopez - who must now be transgressing the void and perhaps searching for this glowing ball of heaven dreams - sneaked up on her. Black eyes watched her from within.

She arrived at the party and had a hard time parking, which was a good sign she supposed. There were some nice huge cars there, top brand SUVs with "Coexist" and Obama '08 stickers on them. A couple also had "Kerry '04", although the cars didn't look to Allie to be 4 years old. Another good sign was the number of Skate, Ski and Surf clothing brand stickers that she saw. As Jack had endlessly reminded her, the key was to get the wives of the top 5 surfers and skaters at the event and then they would get most of the second tier and also the wannabee small business people who had enough money to hang with them and enough alternative credentials to dig the 'Totally Real' spiel.

Inside, the energy was bizarre and cool. She had planned on being early but had ended up merely on time, but at great effort anyway. Disappointing. But as a result there were already people here. There were a few men with proud grey ponytails that looked dusted and powdered like a founding fathers wig, who stood upright and spoke from their diaphragms and who had dynamic and meaningful shirts squirming under plain and well cut jackets. The way they held

a small plate of hors-d'oeuvres reminded her of a picture her grandmother had kept in a back room of ancestor on his plantation with a hunting hawk perched on his wrist.

The sound of the booming men, softened by the silky wall hangings, was counterbalanced by the soft whispery voices of rope haired women in long dresses who could not (and, you could argue, were not seriously trying to) hide their considerable material wealth. Drake was merrily buzzing from one to the other of this crowd, in his tan Armani suit that he had just recently bought: she knew this because an urgent call came in to her husband Jack to rush out and provide counseling on this decision and He. Had. Actually. Gone.

A step or two behind Drake was a man who didn't fit. His tan was deeper and the lines in his cheeks didn't come from a smug half-smile, but from bitter scowls followed by gum-baring and almost predatory grins. The light in his eyes was intense. For a second it glanced on Allie and she practically throbbed. For a second she could practically see the sexual fantasies he was staging in his mind. The speed with which he arranged and visualized them was phenomenal and she could feel the tug of the reality he was organizing. He was deep in The Abundance: he could access it faster than anyone Allie had encountered in a long time. She didn't feel entitled to fight it, or inclined to fight it either. Instead she erected her stance and tinkled a finger in her well-arranged hair and fought off a blush of pride.

The Predator returned to his business as Drake set up a handshake for him. Allie marveled at life. Her attention, as her blood slowed, turned back to the room, which had grown fuller while she had stepped half an inch above the commonplace consensus. There were more regular folk coming in now, no special characteristics other than a slightly Alternative look about them. That was good, she thought, and she noticed that she was getting into this for the first time since the hare-brained scheme had been brought to her attention. There was something about a party, she guessed. Although some terrible things had happened to her in parties back in Texas. But she had brought that on herself. She realized that now. And it was not anti-feminist to think so. The Laws are the Laws.

She saw Candy coming out of one of the little offices with her husband. His manner was like he was giving her a little private tour. How sweet. And yet, there was something charming in seeing him dressed just right, with his Robert

Redford smile on, finally using his charm for something, instead of his muscles or teacher-level brain. It was always fun to see your husband from a distance. Although... he seemed more distant than ever tonight. Lost in time. His present self seemed further from her in than his seven year ago self, walking in the coffee shop and deep-glancing at her.

Allie arrived at the open bar at about the same time Hannah did. They hugged and without a word, picked up champagnes and Allie couldn't interpret what she saw in Hannah's eyes but she did note that her endlessly deep hair seemed over-restrained and might be hurting her even.

The champagnes continued to be picked up. Words and champagne flowed, they both laughed their animalistic laughs and time passed and people came in. The party was starting to sing.

Candy and Jack entered the Tea Room. Candy's hair had been unleashed for the evening's celebration. As smooth as ice cream, as light as wind, one of the great joys of the world, her hair flowed from bare shoulder to bare shoulder with little provocation. To see it was to imagine the kind of lovely world we would have without friction and thermodynamic fascism.

She looked around the room, not just with her eyes but also by means of her tiny little feet.

"So what we have here is kind of the heart of the centre. It's for unstructured social experiences, but with spiritual guidance on hand."

Candy nodded and turned his way. "Wow! Who comes up with all this stuff," she said, while crossing her arms and looking around in a levelheaded way. "Do you guys have a background in this? Are you from spiritual families?"

Jack was not prepared for this question. He had been talking a lot about this place to people but they had all been either self-centered or polite enough to connect with him just in his capacity as a mouthpiece and not question his right to chip away at the world surface.

So why not just talk and see what happened? Sometimes that worked.

"Well... I would have to say no. My Dad was a wanderer though, that's for sure. Never happy. Looked out the window everyday... mad as hell that the world was

still there. While my Mom was expecting me, he comes home one day and says... we have to leave, right now. My Mom says 'What do you mean, I ain't going nowhere!' then he pulls up his t-shirt and she sees this deep red bloody bandage wrapped right the way round his middle, so tight that it looks like it needs to be that way to keep him in one piece.

"Then they start packing and the way Mom tells it she gets this feeling inside her like I am not there any more. She feels light and... hollow. She says she feels like I have already gone on the road and they have to go and find me."

"Which is a long way of saying that they were spiritual in that they made up their own little myths and superstitions and did dumb shit following them."

Candy looked at him for a second. Had he gone too far there? Should he try for a save, like "Then I found yoga" or should he leave it out there? Candy's husband was a brand. They needed Candy at this school. This could not be fucked up under any circumstance.

He left it there.

Candy said, "I totally know what you mean. There's only so much you can do on your own to make sense of life, even once you get tuned into the fact that it is not as simple as they told you when you were at school."

Jack loved this.

"Hey," he said, "Have you met Luna yet? You have to meet Luna."

Luna was just around the corner. Her jet-black hair was longer than Jack remembered it, and her face looked more like she was from India than... Luxembourg, was it?

She was about to flirt with him, when she saw he meant business.

"Luna, this is Candy. Luna is our past life regression specialist. She has been studying under doctor Xiu Fung Lau for the past three years. And she's from Luxembourg. Lichtenstein."

Luna took Candy's hand. "The thing people do wrong is, they forget the little life before we enter the world. Imagine the trauma of your body being formed in the

womb. A single cell, torn in two again and again. The whole history of evolution from single cell, to fish to reptile, to little mammal is played out in just nine months. You know, it could be that the whole history of the world that the scientists think they have discovered is just radio signals bouncing from the true Big Bang of the woman's womb that brought them into being."

Awesome, thought Jack. Slam Dunk!

Hannah and Allie were hostessing. It was getting crazy, but they were not too buzzed to perform well. People were picking up fliers and drinks and pigeonholing gurus in corners and pumping them for freebie wisdom. But you could never get enough in a short session like this. This was just getting them all hooked. Allie and Hannah quietly had to admit to each other that something was happening.

"Look at the Homeless Hunk!" nudged Hannah on Allie.

Adam was dressed in a Nehru jacket and had never looked taller or more imposing. His eyes were still focused a couple of inches below the usual line of sight, so you couldn't really connect with him easily, and the curly shag of his hair obeyed his every whim in letting you talk to him or not. But there was a smile in his step. He happily took questions, held court. He listened like no one else could. He gave simple advice, usually in the form of questions that changed your perspective. Simple and calm, he anchored the wildness of the night.

The ladies went over and offered him another glass of kombucha. "It's less than .5% alcohol!" they teased.

"Very precise!" he replied and took a drink. "This is... intense."

"Luna's home-made," replied Hannah with vicarious pride.

"Delicious. I meant the party, though."

"Oh, yeah... it's quite the shindig!" she said and she meant it. The place was swarming now. She could see quite a few people she knew, lots of Candy's friends. She knew she had better suck up to them. Oh, also she should bring Adam over.

"Adam, this is Kirsty. Hi Kirsty. Mwah. Right, we met at that cook-out. Yes,

actually my husband is one of the founders of the center and this is Adam, our chief instructor."

Kirsty's handsome face subtly lit up, and her twig-like arms folded a little into a stance of assessment. She was wearing a daring green dress and her hair was proof that somehow an organic, carbon-neutral version of 1970s Charlie's Angel strength hairspray had been invented. This was the first time that Hannah had seen Kirsty without the brand of her husband's clothing company prominently displayed somewhere about her person.

Kirsty and Adam were talking hard already.

"No, you're absolutely right. It is so hard to be a mother. He has everything he needs for, like, material things. But... yes, that's the question I ask myself all the time is how can I be sure he is making smart choices out there in his little world?"

That didn't sound like a question Adam would have put to Kirsty. Hannah looked at Adam and wondered what he had really said. Had he said anything at all? Well, whatever, Kirsty was lapping it up, so back to the buffet.

When she got back, Allie had somehow got stuck talking to Drake and his money-man, that repulsive Isaak guy who had once spoken to her extensively about his love for pedigree cats, and she was sure the whole conversation was a long, coded discourse on vaginas, but she couldn't exactly prove it.

Whatever he was putting on the saucer now, Allie was lapping it up. She must be good and drunk. It would be just too awkward to go over there and try and break it up now, so she would just have to rely on Drake to keep things civilized. At that thought, like a creature with its own nervous system, her hand reached out for a drink.

--

"This is quite a party, Jake!"

"Jack. Yeah, I am loving this energy."

"Sorry, Jack! I was thinking about Drake. I mean... not thinking about him. You know! But what a great turn out."

Jack was now taking Candy to see Tito, although he couldn't find Tito. It was buzzing here. Hannah had had the idea to get the various instructors to go out there and bring their own network of people in. In return for harvesting lots of prospects, they would get a large portrait of themselves in the lobby when the center opened: after the center opened, they would do the same recruitment drive and in return get a slightly higher hourly rate. Frankly, most of them agreed after they heard about the portrait.

"Yeah, it's a great turn out! Oh here's Tito. Tito, this is Candy. I want you to tell her all about your Right Thought system."

Tito looked in their general direction and did his smile. His body was animated with a boyish excitement that he had held onto since the sixties, but held to the ground with a heavy shyness that was more of a fifties thing. He put a hand in his thick short curly carbon hair and started to talk.

"Candy. It's wonderful to meet you. Wonderful. Yes. So, my system. Well, not mine. It's your system. The system of your mind. Which is to say your brain. There's no difference really..."

Jack wondered how this nutty professor spiel was going over. Hard to tell. Candy was listening, though, so he decided not to jump in. Now Tito was going behind Candy and about to touch her head.

"Tito is a Doctor of Chiropractic!" Jack suddenly blurted out. But Candy couldn't see the bizarre, goggle-eyed look on Tito's face as he raised his leathery hands anyway, so she probably wasn't freaking out as much as Jack was.

Tap. Tap. Wave.

"The subtle"

(tap)

"energy, of the brain"

(wiggle)

"creates the matrix that the body follows. Not the other way around. Massage! Massage! Might as well try and stop a river by pushing it up from the bottom!"

air grope.

So Jack had received most of the treatments and therapies on offer while he was putting together the team and writing their holistic bible. The colonic stuff he was holding off on, and Allie had said some cruel things to him about his hesitance. But he had tried the rest. Tito's hands off brain massage had actually seemed to work. It had seemed to kind of free up some youthful memories. Jack had so few memories of his early childhood that a previous girlfriend, studying psychotherapy at UCLA, was sure he had been abused in a very profound way. He had written a song about her called "Abuse Porn Addict" back in the Superguitars days, that she had found ironic so he had been forced to break up with her the old fashioned way: sleeping with a friend of hers. Crazy times. But his own theory about his childhood memories was confirmed one time when he found out his dad was driving his truck to L.A. and Jack had practically jumped in front of the rig to get the old man to come out for a beer with him.

The old man drank his yellow beers in the homeliest bar that Jack knew of, and pretty soon the droop of his moustache confirmed that he was comfortable and at peace. The jukebox had been pre-loaded with Johnny Cash, and the pool table was clinking like a working-class wind chime. This was a happy place. And yet, he didn't talk. He listened a bit, but after a while Jack's words started to seem garish neon flamingoes in a Budweiser-red world. The night passed well enough on the terms that companionship, not communication, was what men did.

So Jack's theory about his childhood was this. It was just quiet.

Candy was done with her therapy and noticed him spaced out and asked what was on his mind and he told her and added.

"What most people remember, I think, is not what happened. They remember the stories and the retellings. The propaganda, y'know. But I had just silence. I remembered that silence when Tito was doing his thing. How about you?"

Candy walked away from Jack and through a bead door. She got just far enough away from Jack that he got distracted from what he was doing and noticed how the thin strings of beads played over the seat of the $400 jeans.

The bead door hung, with minor whispers for a second. Jack watched the beads still, although they were no longer ass-shaped.

"It was awesome. What's next?" said Candy from beyond.

--

Drake looked at Allie, who was talking rapidly. He began to have the feeling like he was looking at a person who was quite drunk and who was driving very fast. Looking from the passenger seat.

He glanced up at Isaak to read how he was taking all this. If he saw even a glimmer of ennui he would shut Allie down with a bribe or a bauble, or whatever it took. Their ongoing lite-sexting [flirxting?] relationship meant nothing to Jack at this moment, or any other moment where money was at stake. Which was always, he reflected.

But Isaak was into it, it seemed. It amused him to watch a woman on full display, he had once said.

"People don't even know. They don't even know what life is! They think it is just something that happens to them. It's pathetic really," said Allie with an amusing amount of energy.

Isaak curled a lip, like a toreador flipping his cape.

"But you do know, is that it?"

She bit at the shark bait.

"I know. I see life in the raw. I am a nurse. I see people at the end of their life. I have... I am a gatekeeper."

She drew blood. He had not expected this fierceness. He walked to get drinks and pulled her along in his gravity well, gesturing to Drake that he needed some time alone.

"Changing bed pans... this is your source of wisdom?"

He handed her a martini to go with the softball tease. She took both. This was almost no fun.

"I do see a lot of shit. People are full of it. Even if some people like to wrap

themselves up in a $2000 dollar suit. But it's eyes that tell the real story. Did you know that?" and somehow the martini was gone by the end of that outburst. He glanced at her palms for evidence of a small mouth.

"I agree, actually," he said. And it was true: this was something he had noticed many years ago when he first opened his small Asian trading company and decided one day to become very rich.

"So," he said, "let's look into each others eyes."

Drake was not happy about what was going on. Not happy to be left out of it, but also not happy that Isaak was being distracted like this in the middle of the big pitch. What to do? What to do?

Hannah, saw that Drake was getting quite agitated. She contemplated going over to help him, but didn't think that would go very well. Stay in the cave and let me hunt, woman! Then she noticed something more important anyway, the man from the San Diego Union-Tribune was here! His daughter was on Violet's soccer team and that was about the extent of Hannah's connection to him. So she had worn an extra tight t-shirt last Saturday when she brought the event up, although it was a classy one with a bit of antique lace at the v-neck. He lived nearby, he said, and also was an alcoholic, she knew, so it turned out to be a quite easy sell. When she put on her dress tonight she had noticed it was a bit tight at the chest also. Was that the future, now?

Anyway, she went over to greet him. He was a thick-necked man who would look like a rugby player if he didn't wear glasses apparently crafted from discarded vintage television sets.

"Very nice, Hannah, very nice place. What is it again... a yoga studio?"

"Hi Tobias! We have a yoga studio, yes. And there is a lot more going on too. I'll show you around after we get you something from the buffet."

"No. I'll just look around on my own. Reporters are like that, you know. We like to get our noses in things."

"Well, I have a tip off for you that the pâté is marvelous."

Soon, he was noshing on the pâté at a rate that would make a force-fed goose

proud. She didn't tell him it was vegan. Why bother. He would probably throw up.

"So what are you working on, Tobias?"

"The military beat. Sniffing around these base closures that they are talking about. Lot of military family hardship stuff. The trial is cooling down a little bit now they think that Jenkins is dead. That was a fun couple of weeks though."

Hannah poured Tobias a small glass of champagne. The bubbles were floating from the top to the bottom of the glass, which didn't seem right to her. And it was very quiet and she felt like she was on stage for a second, which she had not been for a long time.

"Oh, that Marine war crimes thing?"

"Woah woah woah, Hannah! A crime during a war is not a war crime. Things happen in the heat. Plus we don't know what happened. He was the only one who ever showed any sign of co-operating then all of a sudden he is AWOL. Which you can take one of a couple of ways: he was trying for a plea bargain by sinking his buddies and he manned up and couldn't go through with it. Or he had the real dope and was encouraged to go for a little walk.

"Either way, not to pull a Humphrey Bogart but six dead people in a hole in the ground twenty miles from Baghdad don't amount to a hill of beans compared to what is going on over there. I mean whether you are for the war or you're against it or whatever... it's a rounding error.

"But I gotta sell papers of course."

Hannah took a breath. She looked around the room full of people who all --ALL- had great teeth and imagined a predator drone smashing through the ceiling and rounding every single error of their whole lives away.

It was a cleansing moment, in a way.

--

"Candy, I would like you to meet Lar-Gand. Lar-Gand, please don't think this is rude but I want to tell Candy that I do not necessarily endorse your statements

that you come the 24th century but that I do think you are a cool guy."

Lar-Gand laughed a bit late, but with gusto. His moustache was very well groomed and well suited to laughter. He gave Candy one of those two handed, long-hold handshakes.

"He will come round. I see a role for you on the transition team one day, Jack. It's already written in my history books."

His eyes could not twinkle more if they were disco glitter-balls. Unlike the other people Candy had met tonight, Lar-Gand was glowing with genuine insanity. But not in a creepy way.

A few minutes later he had his tarot cards out. Jack didn't get that. If you were from the future, what was up with the tarot cards? Weren't you reading the past, in that case? Could Jack get Tarot cards out to tell him what had happened in Lubbock in 1985? Did that make up for not having kept a diary because he was too busy being obsessed with baseball and trying to clear up the mystery behind the Lubbock Lights.

The Lubbock Lights! It had been a long, long time since he had thought about that. He had kept a thick dossier about the incident, unsatisfied with the official Blue Book explanation that the lights in the sky had been the bellies of Plovers reflecting streetlights. How implausible! "Oh my gosh! What's them lights on them sticks!"

It was all coming back. His arms tired from practicing endlessly with Dad out back, he would pull out a triple-hole-punched folder that was full of pictures of Yetis, crystal skulls and other elements at the edge of understanding. Just knowing about one UFO incident, it turned out, led you to a lot of supporting material you needed to be up to speed on. You might meet someone who shot down your theory about magnetic interference because they knew a whole lot about ball lightning or the KGB psychic program.

He kept it all so secret. Why was that? His mom was obsessive with the church at that point. Was he copying her in his own way, but scared of the bands of interference if their signals meshed.

His Dad would have laughed his ass off. Bad enough that Jack had lived through the cliché of the burned comic book collection already.

Jack was receiving signals direct from his past that leaped over ten or twelve years of not having been disturbed in the slightest. The memories arrived so fresh, he could have believed they were brand new, some kind of implants.

Was this the tarot cards of the past? What the hell was happening in this room tonight?

Candy's reading was almost done.

"The Hanged Man does not represent death so much as a man who is hung between two states of reality. Like Schrödinger's cat. You know that one? No. Well it is the quantum reality paradox that since an atom can both exist and not exist until observed, and since the life of a being can depend on what that atom is doing you can imagine a being who both exists and doesn't exist. This is the same principle we use for teleportation in the 24th century. In your time, it usually refers to someone who has not chosen their identity and is waiting for others to choose it for them."

"And is that me?"

"No, not necessarily. The cards are about your life and you have more than one person in your life."

"These illustrations are gnarly, by the way. Is that... what is that? A spaceship?"

"No, that is a phallotron. You see in my time..."

Great time to interrupt.

"Lar-Gand, there are a few more people I want Candy to see tonight. Would you mind if we ran along? Candy can have a session with you when she joins the club right? "

Candy and Jack moved on. They were arm in arm, Jack noticed, as they headed down the corridor to the Yoga studio. In that corridor a young woman with raven-black hair and piercings in all mucus membranes sulkily looked at the floor while her corkscrew-haired boyfriend explained some Important Political Stuff to her. They squeezed past.

"If you don't know their game, Vanity, they are still playing it on you!" said the

boyfriend.

Candy and Jack were met by the many mirrors of the Yoga room. They multiplied indefinitely. Christ, they looked good together, they thought as one. Something about his rugged Adam's apple set off her lean collarbones, for example. Jack was almost about to say something but he had no idea what. His muscles were arranging themselves for sound, but since a hundred different possibilities were juggling against each other in a mental bingo machine of the frontal lobe, even he had no idea which one was going to pop out.

Then, amid a small universe of their own reflections they noticed they were not alone. A thin, pale, very normal looking guy in his thirties was having a chat with Marta, the Hot Yoga girl. She was looking at the thin man like they were not quite communicating. Her eyes were a little scrunched. Perhaps he was a bit too straight?

So Jack made a quick transaction and soon he was talking to the thin guy, who was English and called Michael. He kept one eye on Candy of course. She and Marta hit it off immediately. Yoga was awesome for getting people in the club: it was all the rage for looking sexy and apparently one of the easiest exercise regimes to do with implants. Of course, they couldn't succeed just with Yoga: Jack's research had shown him that the San Diego coast had more Yoga studios per capita [1.3 per 10,000 inhabitants] than almost any where in the world. Except probably India or somewhere. It was more of a Google session than an in depth study.

"Japan! Cool. So, how did you get the invite?"

"Well, I am here on business right now and Isaak mentioned this party."

"Oh, you know Isaak?"

"Well, he knows me. Next best thing."

"And what kind of business are you in?

"Right now, I'm selling an iPhone app called iThink. You tell it what movies, books, food and sexual positions you like and who your friends are and it will make all of your important decisions for you. The more friends you add, the less often you will feel conflicted, excluded and inadequate in your life choices. 99

cents."

"Sounds cool. So is it pretty rough over there in Japan still? I heard all the crazy news about the population problems."

"It's better than I expected actually. Nice place to live. This is an interesting concept you have here. Commoditized spirituality."

This might be a compliment. Fucking Brits... you could never tell.

"Well, if you have a society based on buying and selling... why not sell something worthwhile?"

"Yes. Spirituality for recreation is probably better than saving it up for a big holy war."

"Totally. Unless you are joking. Well, no... I agree anyway. No one here is going to give up being rich and bored so give them something to fill the gap. The concepts are real no matter how they are packaged and sold."

"I was reading your center's 'bible'."

Jack felt very uncomfortable, like his Mom had found his diary.

"We don't call it a bible... but okay what did you think?"

"A really interesting synthesis of every spiritual trend that could possibly be transformed into a celebration of the ego. Do you - you Californians - really think you can control the universe with your minds?"

Jack paused for a second. Wouldn't it be fun to punch this guy in the face? It couldn't hurt to imagine that just for a moment. The mirrors would make it even more fun, he concluded, as he ran the simulation. It would be like Bruce Lee at the end of Enter the Dragon.

--

Okay, it was probably time to pull Allie away from the moneyman. Because she was undoing his tie was why.

"Allie! Hate to interrupt but I really need your help with this phyllo pastry stuff. You know how finickity it is."

Allie turned round and was shockingly undrunk looking. In fact she looked more sober than usual, more clinical.

"Oh really. Is that right? So you need me do you?"

"Well, I would certainly appreciate your help. This is a big night for our families."

Isaak smirked in soft focus.

"Sounds like your friend is in need. It has been a pleasure talking to you. Maybe our paths will cross in the future."

Allie turned round. "Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? There is no maybe. Our paths will cross in the future if I goddamn want them to. You don't have a monopoly on power, Isaak. This is not your universe. Thanks for the conversation, it was fucking awesome."

Then she staggered over towards the kitchen and Hannah followed after making a few gestures toward Isaak about how funny life was.

The night had started to get old. People were leaving and two of the young yoga girls were making sure they got fliers and signed up for the free month. Everyone looked like they were really going to come back and meant it. They saw that this was an awesome club, not just the YMCA with incense burning. Hannah could feel it.

Allie was slowly throwing up a silvery liquid in the staff-room kitchen sink as Hannah came in. Hannah opened her mouth to say something kind and sisterly but instead out came "I hope you didn't just piss Isaak off too much."

Sometimes, before you start to speak, you need to cleanse your palate first. A bit too late, Hannah sipped some champagne.

Allie's mouth was now empty and she said, "Did you know you are not my big sister, Hannah? You are so lost it shocks me. You don't even get that me and Isaak... we're playing on a different playing field than you guys are. You are

down in the phenomena, chasing rainbows. We are up in the clouds, making our own rainbows."

Hannah decided to just wait this one out. Her shoes were killing her, so she hoped it would be quick.

"We get life and we get death and you don't. I know, I can tell just by looking at Isaak that he has killed men. Or willingly signed off on their deaths anyway. He can see when the lights go out! When people lose the will, he comes and takes their life and he does wonderful stuff with it."

The shoes were really killing her so she said "Whatever, Allie. Just because you touch dead people doesn't mean you are an expert on mortality."

Allie slammed her hands down on the counter and said "Don't you get it? Don't you even get what I have been telling you?! I am not just talking the talk, I walk it, Hannah! It means something to me to be alive and I won't let anybody piss on that.

"I see the black eyes! I see when people are ready to go and I help them. I help them go where they belong. Me. Allie. Not you, not your fucking Drake or any of these clowns around here who need losers like Drake and Jack to tell them how to be alive. Me!"

Hannah dropped her champagne glass. She looked at sweet little Allie and found she couldn't look at sweet little Allie. This was the new Allie. The Allie who worked in a hospital full of people who no one really cared about much.

But she was drunk, she was drunk, it was just words and she didn't, she hadn't, she couldn't, she...

Adam saw Hannah staggering around in a corridor and went over to her.

"Been hitting the kombucha?" he asked and eased her over to one of the benches in the Tea Room, which was a quiet area now.

"Adam, something... something really big... just kind of... flew by me."

"I'm guessing you aren't ready to talk about it yet."

"No. I don't want to even think about it yet."

"That won't make it go away, though. But you know that."

"I know that. Look, let's close this party down well, okay? Did you meet Candy yet?"

"Jack has her well covered."

"I bet. Well in that case, come on, I want you to see Tobias."

They crossed the floor of happy faces heading to the door. Hannah weaved through them not wanting to touch and poison them. Her insides felt like ice. Tobias was necking down the last, crucial, inch of his drink when she caught his eye.

"Tobias, before you go I wanted to introduce you to Adam. Adam is one of our guiding lights here."

Adam shook Tobias' hand, although Tobias seemed uncomfortable. A gust of moist air from the door had turned his glasses into congealed fog.

"And Tobias works for the Tribune, covering all sorts of stuff. Mainly military."

And Adam froze. Absolutely froze. Like time frozen, not like cold frozen. His face looked like death.

After the freeze, Adam shaded his face with his hand and mumbled "Awesome" in a teenage style.

"I have to go," was the next thing he said and then he rudely delivered on that promise.

Tobias wiped off his glasses.

"Strange guy!" he said, and Hannah limply defended him with some bullshit excuses.

"I have met him before," Tobias said.

"Really?" asked Hannah.

"Yeah. I never forget a voice, although I can't place it yet. Is he ex-Military?"

Hannah decided she would try and do some of that visualization stuff. She visualized a clean, clean space around her full of natural materials and good simple people. Black deathlike thoughts were far away. War, corruption, hospitals, infidelities were nowhere near. The war was nowhere near. Iraq was nowhere near. Nothing was near her. She looked up at Tobias from this little white bubble she had made for herself.

"I don't think so," she said and then she saw Tobias out and she reminded herself endlessly in the parking lot that people made the universe, not fate, destiny or blind coincidence.

Oh, but what people. And such things that they wished for.

Around that time, Jack and Candy were wrapping up their evening together. Jack's brain was buzzing. He felt like he had been standing on his head all evening. He didn't want the night to end, but it would be weird to drag it out longer.

"Thanks so much for the personal tour," said Candy as they walked out toward her car.

"Well, I'm sorry... I got a bit overexcited. I guess I didn't even realize what we had in there! It's like... I dunno... eye opening. But, look, I hope you liked it."

She paused; she paused well. "I loved it. It's so... real! Ha!"

"Really?"

"Really."

They looked at each other for another second. There was no clear direction they were going, and they had to make every new second from scratch.

"Have you ever met my husband?" she finally asked, with a very serious, thin-lipped expression.

"Maybe. I think so. I saw one of his videos one time for sure. He's pretty awesome."

"He's just this guy, y'know."

"Great skater."

"Great skater. Totally rich. Probably going to put a gun in his mouth and blow his brains out one day."

Not expected.

"Maybe... maybe, he should come here?"

She held his hand.

"You are a good guy."

Or maybe she was trying to shake hands. Unclear.

"I hope we see more of you."

She let go of his hand and got in her car then she handed him a scrap of paper with a phone number on it.

"I will let everyone know that your place is awesome. And I will come here a lot. But also, I really think you should cheat on your freak show wife with me, and my husband won't give a fuck. So when your schedule opens up I want you to call that number and we can go to my place in Julian."

Normally, this would freak Jack out but it was a very special kind of a night. A very powerful night.

"Let me give you my business card too," was what he said. She took it and put it in her tight pocket with a playful smile. Then she drove away with a hybrid hum.

Drake walked up.

"Playboy: looks like mission accomplished at your end."

Jack turned and fist-bumped Drake. They always had 'good fist-bump'.

"I swear I was just trying to get in her wallet, man. How about you?"

"I don't know if you noticed but your wife, who is mentally ill, did not manage to totally ruin things. Although, you should be careful because I think she is going to leave you and become Isaak's concubine or something. If she ever comes out of that coma that she is in, in the kitchen.

"But anyway, he's in. The money is in. The empire starts here."

"I am too tired to express the kind of wild excitement I am feeling," said Jack, "but that is just... unbelievable."

"Believe, man, believe!"

"She's in the kitchen, huh?"

"Yeah"

Soon, Jack put her in the car. She had the bearable kind of puke smell on her, the kind that is mainly alcohol. Perhaps... perhaps he should have paid more attention to her tonight. Then again, she was a grown up. Then again, she wasn't. And, he had found out tonight, neither was he. He was a kid who had lived his whole life drifting. But now he was swimming.

"Jack?"

It was Hannah who looked tiny and porcelain under the parking lot lights.

"Hannah. Tonight was beyond awesome. I'm so sorry about Allie."

"Can you call me please, Jack? Maybe not tomorrow but soon?"

"For sure: no question. What's up?"

"Maybe nothing. But probably everything."

Jack looked hard at her. Despite the fact that she would occasionally freak out if she thought she could hear a microwave oven, Hannah was kind of tough. And now she looked like she was fragmenting.

"We can talk now."

"No, I need to think. Is that okay?"

He said yes. They hugged goodbye in the usual way and then he confirmed that everyone was getting home safely and that Adam was going to lock up as usual and drove home.

The moon stood guard over the ocean. Adam had made his way down to the beach, past the last lone palm tree and the oily-smelling concessions stand and the volleyball courts and to the point where you couldn't see the large-windowed houses anymore.

The breeze was cold. The creatures were small and hidden. The ocean was loud and black but white-sounding. Adam was looking at the ocean and he was asking himself important questions.

Chapter 10

The children saw a heron. It was standing in the water, on its skinny legs and looking down deep. It was a metal blue, with a very long beak. Then the water splashed and its head dived down. Or maybe the other way around. They had different opinions on that. Either way, in just a second, a red crab was finding out what a heron's beak feels like and then what it can do to you. The crab was watermelon red and candy-apple crunchy.

-Totally gross, said Violet

-What an awesome hunter! enthused Gavin, with a fist in the air.

The children walked across a log about as thick as a Dad's leg across the surface of the little pond and they bounced ripples and dragonflies out of their sleep. No one yelled at them. It seemed a really long time that they had not seen adults.

-What if there were no grown ups? posed Gavin.

-We would get hungry.

-I forgot to mention the robots.

They got to the other side of the pond. The boring bits of the crab were plopping and declining into the water. The heron's throat bloated and it calmly necked down meat and shell alike. Its feet didn't move and it reminded the children more of a carnivorous plant than of the rapacious predators that often stalked their

dreams.

-What would you do if one of those mountain lions jumped out right now? asked Gavin. And he really did want to know.

Violet paused for a second and bit her lower lip then threw some hair in there too for extra bite. Then...

-Kiyyaaaaah!!! She yelled and did a huge front kick on a bush. The bush was not ready for such a kick and did not recover gracefully. Meanwhile, Gavin was tickled pink and laughing himself full of hiccups.

-Anyway, we are too big, added Violet, and we are too strong. I would show that big thing my violet power and he would run away and look for a baby or a kid in a wheelchair.

-They are more scared of of us than of us than them, said Gavin and he thought he had got that about right.

Their little feet had brought them to a clearing that was coddled by large cottony fronds that held sunshine in their fuzz for all to see and enjoy.

Gavin felt like he was inside the great, ribby chest of a monstrous whale, full of bloated bronchi that would carry it to any depth, but he kept that thought to himself because it was so delicious. But he dropped a karate kick on a big frond anyway, because that is what his leg's brain wanted to do.

-I bet you can't climb up that tree, she challenged him.

The tree snarled at Gavin. It showed many spiky fingers that would poke him on the way down to the ground after it shrugged him off its shoulders. But the thought of not climbing it did not occur to him. He just needed a bit of scared time first before he could actually start moving.

Violet watched Gavin half way up the tree. He was doing his legs wrong. She chewed on a little stick she had found, covered in deer sperm (although, of course, she didn't know. Even a grown up wouldn't know that. At first. But that is why we don't stick shit in our mouths.)

Her mom's voice suddenly sneaked in their grotto from fairly far away. Violet

knew many things that her mom didn't know. One was that when you whisper, it makes sounds that are quiet but that go a lot further.

-I don't know what to tell you, Jack, but I think she is killing people.

Violet heard that but it was so far from the things she normally heard that it didn't really stick to her.

Actually, it was like one thing. Her Dad often came in her bedroom drunk when he came home from the bar. He sat next to her bed and held her hand and talked beer words for a bit. One time he said to her, "Your mother is killing me." She looked around the room for ghosts when he said that, in case they were coming to get him. She saw ghosts a lot. They wore hats from all different times in historical periods but had the same eyes and nose. She wished they would go away - she did not want to see things that other people did not see.

At the new school Daddy had made, the woman had been telling her how exciting it was to look into other worlds and other times and how grateful the ghosts must be. But there were already too many people in this world, and she didn't much like helping people anyway. And all the ghosts looked like they were her brothers and sisters, and she didn't want brothers and sisters.

-Now you can go out on that big branch, she said, and jump on the pond

-That sounds dumb. I don't want to do that. I'll break my legs.

-It's water, Dummy. Water is SOFT. SOOOOOFT!

They both cracked up.

-Go on, dummy, she said.

He closed his eyes and 'visuized' landing clean in the middle of the water and not getting a frog in his face or legs coming shooting out of his shoulders. He thought about the heron's head sliding through the water.

The fall lasted forever and his heart went like a dragonfly wing. The splash was disappointing to everyone. He only went waist deep, and then he walked slowly out.

-Let's go get some snacks, said Violet

Gavin felt awful now he had left the water. His pants told him to go back in and forget about this dry land thing. He shivered.

-Well, okay Jack, it is crazy but he shows up with no past just when this Marine guy goes missing and he is all buff and hardcore.

The two kids came out of the bushes. Gavin was a total mess and Violet looked hungry. This was almost certainly exactly how Adam and Eve looked when God found them after their nonsense.

The two adults looked like they had been sitting there slapping each other in the face for fifteen minutes. Raw and stupefied.

Violet saw a fog around them, an intermingled yellow fog.

"GROSS!" she said, and would never explain why.

The two families split and headed home. Both parents were noticeably tense, but did not take it out on the kids at all. This made the kids hug them and hang on them a lot and they got a lot of love in return. Both parents sat quietly, looking at their spouse, that night.

Chapter 11

More time passed. People ignored the big chunky things that might stop time from passing. For example, Hannah and Jack did not talk to each other at all.

Jack and Drake and Adam powered ahead. Money poured down from Isaak to get the other schools set up, and the first location suddenly was seeing massive momentum from the fabulous people. Places like the Chapel of Awareness and the Self Realization Fellowship looked rather old and stodgy next to 'Totally Real.' If they were a loincloth, 'Totally Real' was a smoking-hot pair of sexy yoga pants. Are you feeling me?

The feeling was happening. Contracts were being signed. Candy was there with some new pals at least once a week. She would occasionally corner Jack and ask if his schedule had opened up yet. He said that he was slammed. She said, 'You should slam me.' He would freeze in a fuzzy VCR pause and she would laugh

and say, no hurry, no hurry. He would never just shut her down but he would never get out of that VCR freeze. This continued for a month, during which time he was acting like a hilarious goofball with his wife, and she grew disgusted with him. There was a particularly bad 24-hour period where she swore she would leave him if he didn't stop talking in that ridiculous Indian accent and he did not know why he couldn't stop. Thankfully, perhaps, Drake suddenly turned up with a bottle of Vodka and schmoozed them both and the night ended with them all doing home-Karaoke to "Welcome to the Jungle" while Gavin covered his ears behind a flimsy door.

When she went off to work these days, Jack always took the time to watch her driving away. He was hypnotized by the possibilities he would not admit. One day he was at Trader Joe's, reading ingredients on some frozen waffles when he had a daydream that started as an affair fantasy but ended up with him being arrested in front of the Chinese lady next door and, as they marched him away, the police started excavating his front yard and plucking horribly long bones out of it.

He pushed that bizarre phantasmagoria out of his mind as he drove home but it left a less outrageous, and therefore harder to shift, dust behind itself. Just him being questioned by no one in particular, a hazy human. "And you didn't know? There was no clue what your wife was doing?"

And his weak answer: "She just didn't seem the type."

--

What form did his denial of Adam's status as a potential war criminal take? Mainly playing basketball with him quite a lot and generally staying 'in the now'.

Fortunately, Drake kept driving Adam up to Santa Monica to recruit spiritual people for branch number 2. Santa Monica! Now that was some serious rent. But potentially big returns. Drake called excitedly one afternoon.

"Man, Adam is on fire. I got him in a room with these ten angry yogis who were going to do a picket line outside our place or something and he's struggling a bit at first and then suddenly he goes off on this wild tangent about 'self definition'... like that there are all of these people around here who don't know who they are and it is our responsibility to reach out, and to get down to the level people understand, which is walking into a store. Like Jesus went out with the

prostitutes and the beggars and opened the door. They were fucking pumped, man. He had his Charlie Manson eyes going, along with his ice-cold voice. He even had me believing it. I practically had to leave the meeting to fax my résumé over to the Nobel committee."

Jack softly wished that Adam would fuck up. Then Jack would know that he was avoiding asking Adam the awkward questions because of common sense, respect and friendship rather than self-interest.

Jack had quit his teaching job. Well, the principal said he was going to put Jack on furlough, because he didn't want to close the door on such a great teacher. It was clear that the principal didn't have much faith in Jack's new direction. It was true that Jack had done a bad job selling his wife and his [ex] boss on how rich he was going to get. Yet, he genuinely believed it was going to succeed. His role was just to keep things rolling. To make sure all of the talent was happy, to do the soft sells (that, he could do), and keep updating the 'bible' with any new bullshit he came across as he lurked around massage businesses and dropped in on drum circles.

He was at one such drum circle when he came across something that he didn't quite know what to do with. Down near Black's just after sunset, when the sky is often like a stripy blanket, Jack strolled along wearing a long sleeved t-shirt that was a proven September favorite. Under one arm, a small Djembe to slap. With his right hand he caressed his new Van Dyke beard and teased the ends of his slightly curly moustache. Even though he was a cool guy, there was always a moment of anxiety before entering the circle, even more so now he was a corporate spy. The little orange pocket of people on the blue sand opened to let him in. It was a medium-sexy group. About twelve surfers, yoginis and stoners. There was also little pocket of grimy looking college girls magnetized to a slightly porky, grad-student looking guy with flecks of grey on his face hair. Something about this group called to Jack, so he settled down next to them.

Then Jack saw Kiwi, the guy who had invited him, and stood up for a bro-hug and some hand slapping.

"Awesome, ta see ya, mate. Love yer drum: didya get it in Ghana?"

"Ghana? No, at a swap meet in Compton. I don't travel much."

"Just through the dimensions of the mind, eh mate? Haven't seen you on the

waves much. We got a fuck-off swell last week. It's like a fucking bath in there it's so warm still."

"I'm overloaded at the business, you know. But I should get out. Maybe at the weekend. Hey, who is that guy there?"

"Who? Toby? He is the dope man. He's a college lecturer, I think. Alright bloke. Always travels with pussy and dope."

"Points for that!"

"Big points, mate, big points! You fucking crack me up!"

Jack headed back over to his delve and his drum, by Toby.

The rhythms got started. Jack was getting into it, throwing in unexpected riffs and tabla-style rolls, then dropping out. A skinny blonde girl got up and danced in the middle, as always happened.

"I want to invite you. Deep inside. Into my dance and my ride. There is a place I have never shown. OOOOO. It is mine."

Jack just kept on drumming and zoned her out. It was cool that she had her thing. Hmm. Maybe spiritual singing could be a nice class? He would have to tap her up once she got off her groove.

Boosh! A huge wave hit the beach and cleansed Jack's mind. Now he was picking up bits and pieces of what Toby was talking about [he'd been talking the whole time. Jackass.]

"It has never happened in the history of mankind that a large building collapsed without burning for DAYS."

"So, how did they do it?"

"Mini nukes in the WTC. They have the right kind of concrete pulverization profile and temperature to take out multiple floors of structure. Six of them per building."

"Woah."

"And who has access to Mini Nukes? Yeah? Only the government!"

Boosh!

"He was sitting there with the fucking goat book UPSIDE DOWN"

Booooosh!

"You are so right, Toby. Why won't people just face up to what is really happening in this country?"

"It's just like Chomsky said..."

BOOOOOOOSH!

Jack shook his head and dislodged from the young 9-11 truthers. That was some crazy shit when you saw a building get knocked down by a plane, but that didn't satisfy you: 'what could possibly have brought that building down?'

"So answer me this," said Jack, rather out of the blue.

Toby turned around, and his girls did too. Jack felt like he was in the jungle, among a tribe, questioning a big hairy dirty chief.

"Uh... what?"

"If the government can do all of this shit you are saying... if they have such complete control of reality how come they never found WMDs in Iraq? I mean how hard would that be to do? If you can nuke New York City, I mean."

Toby paused for a second. In his head, a Tetris rain of conspiracy pieces arranged themselves.

"It's obvious, isn't it? A WMD-find means 'mission accomplished; let's get out here'. They needed to pivot to democracy and civil war so they can stay there indefinitely."

"Why do they want to stay there?"

"Oil. And power."

"What oil? What power? This is breaking our fucking back! Isn't it a bit simpler that people were fucking angry at Arabs and went and found the Moslem countries no one liked very much and fucked them over?"

Toby paused.

"You stick with your simple reality, man. It seems to serve you well."

Jack went quiet. Toby felt an awesome sense of rhetorical triumph, as did his girls who had felt awkwardly drawn to Jack for a minute or two there.

Jack was quiet because the phrase "stick with your simple reality" had rather hit home. Also, Iraq. Jack looked at the ocean, now black with blue foam. Either there was a dead Marine in there, or he was working at their Club and potentially able to go off like a mini-nuke at any moment. That had to be dealt with.

Then far away from the ocean - in San Diego measures - was his wife who was either a great nurse or a murderer. That also had to be dealt with but never could. All he could do was just listen and watch and hope. He would call Hannah and tell her he could never ask his wife about that. Never. He hoped she would get that.

He left the circle, giving the dancing girl his card on the way out because he was a pro.

Heading back to his car, he did not feel that his decision to deal with half of his problems was a good decision but he was sure that it was a made decision. He was smart enough to know that you can agonize and pick at these things but there is something deeper in you that holds onto these decisions and rides them all the way to the end.

Chapter 12

Hannah parked in front of the hospital. It was cozy pinkish stucco on the outside and glowed with inland warmth. Hannah was please to see the use of native plants and succulents in the landscaping. From inside the car, the movement of the wheelchair and the conversation between the large Samoan intern and the frail old lady was eerily silent. The speed of the chair was so consistent, the silence so full. It was like watching a bubble slowly rise through a shampoo bottle.

She got out and made her way to the reception area. She had an appointment, under an assumed name, to consider admitting her mother for treatment for an eating disorder. She had decided against the wig, but did go with the headscarf and oversize sunglasses. She was sure that Allie was not working and was quite proud of the way she had confirmed that without raising any suspicion on Allie's part [she had arranged a crafting party, and by a clever process of throwing dates at the wall had found out when Allie was taking Gavin to soccer.]

Hannah met the admissions director and they chatted. The admissions director was a black man with a warm way about him that Hannah liked. She would certainly consider admitting Drake to this hospital if needed, except that the commute was killer.

"And, could you kindly," (she was assuming a South Carolina accent) "let me know a little bit more about your nursing staff. At the previous establishment that was quite the sticking point for mah mother."

And the doctor obliged and eventually got to Allie.

"She's young with lots of energy, but very serious. Probably one of the most conscientious people we have here. Always going the extra yard, staying late. She pays extra attention to the people who most need it. A real star."

'The people who most need it.' That made sense: those in the extreme stage of despair and near death. They would attract a death vampire.

Hannah arranged to have a bit of time chatting to the patients without the director. She was surprised how easy that was. He was a trusting soul and proud of his hospital. Nothing to hide. The blind usually have nothing to hide, Hannah noted to herself.

Alone in the ward, she finally felt the intense weirdness of what she was doing. Barely in control of her own trivial life, she was injecting herself into a possible tragedy of others. She was clutching a small handbag that she had carefully picked as being perfect for 'Miss Clarabelle DuPont' while standing naked in her bedroom that morning. The bag came first and the rest of the disguise followed. Back when she was designing sets, she had worked a lot with a costume designer who worked that way, arguing that the accessories are often the most constant and expressive element of our daily costume.

Again, she felt the weirdness. Because those were real burns, not makeup, and all of these wheezing machines and weeping daughters were also authentic and not hollow paper-mâché. It was she who was made of paper-mâché.

She spoke to a handful of people. They seemed happy to meet her. It was gratifying. Maybe she should become a nurse. Was there a kind of nurse who didn't have to touch people? A counselor of some kind?

They chatted about the lives that had led them there, which mainly had a kind of appalling inevitability about them when seen from the perspective of a near-vegetarian, who ate organic and did a lot of yoga and maintained a positive mental attitude and hardly even drank these days. And as they chatted, you know what Hannah did? She looked deep into their eyes, looking for what Allie saw. And although she was looking at first with a scientific curiosity, she began to get hungry for it. Hungry to see something deep and beyond. To look at the edges of the world.

She was disappointed to ultimately see nothing. Until she realized what seeing something might do to you. But then that faded and the disappointment came back. She was next to the bed of an elderly Haitian woman who didn't mind a bit of silent company one bit and Hannah actually reached out and held the woman's hand as she listened to the delicate web of hums, beeps and gasps that constituted silence here. Hannah was surprised to be holding a stranger's hand. Perhaps she would play 'Miss Clarabelle DuPont' more often.

Some facts slowly came together. Lots of people had been passing in their sleep lately. They had all been attended to by her friend Allie. But also by a lot of other people.

So not exactly facts, but Hannah was starting to get the impression that people had noticed a lot of quiet deaths. Hannah decided to outright ask the elderly Jewish man with stomach cancer.

"My momma is a big believer in letting go when the time comes. Do you think they do that here? Help you on your way?"

He chewed his cheeks for a while, and furrowed his brow.

"I hope not. I still got the fight in me. Don't want an angel of death coming for me, thank you very much. But some of the folks here... yeah, they were done. I

think they are good here about... you know, not drawing things out. That young nurse..."

"Nurse Alison?"

"Yeah, Nurse Allie. She..."

"She?"

"I shouldn't say anything."

Hannah just nodded, practically pissing herself with tension and desire.

Thankfully, he continued.

"I'm not saying she is doing anything... wrong, y'know. But she knows who is ready to go. That's all I'm saying."

He said, it she heard it, and suddenly she felt okay with it. When you heard it at a party it was an awful crime. Here... it was not.

They chatted for a bit longer, about his tap dancing career. Then they parted, and she walked away in those silk stockings which were actually a real pleasure to wear and which gave the old man a lift.

She got in the elevator and headed downstairs. In the lobby there was a bit of a fight going on. A woman in her late fifties or so was being pushed forward by a young dark-haired couple who looked like siblings but interacted like spouses. The woman was full of fear. She said things like, don't put me in here, let me stay at home, people die in hospitals, I'm getting better, I'm getting better. Hannah tried to avoid it all, but it was one of those big kind of scenes and it was in a small kind of a lobby. She ended up inches away from it all, within its smell even. And the disguise, the character, was crumbling as she got closer to leaving this lobby and running to the hybrid car that was very much part of Hannah's life and not Clarabelle's.

So she was herself again when the lady got really close and she looked right at the taut but still wrinkled sheet of skin, with holes where the eyes should be. Black holes.

She managed to get to the car before vomiting coffee and bile. All traces of her persona were gone now; she was just dressed funny and shaking with anger.

Not fear, not disgust. Anger.

Chapter 13

"It's Bush and Cheney who should be on trial."

Jack had heard that a few times when people were talking about the trials going on up in the Camp. Whenever Jack thought of 'the Camp', he thought of Bilko. The Camp just sounded so jolly. "Why Colonel Hall, let me explain. What? A hole in the ground? Full of corpses? Sir, I was just coming back from a friendly game of fund-raising canasta over at the mess hall and I heard the most unusual noises and thinking it was the regimental pig, in a state of distress...."

Jack was in a confused state of mind. He had waited until Allie came home from work and then driven up north to confront Adam. Then just as his car crossed the lagoon a huge moon had appeared and it felt a bit like he had just driven off a cliff. He'd blinked until he could feel the thrum of the ground beneath his tires and then he had stopped in at Denny's for a big black, pure coffee. He overshot a little with the coffee: it was so big and black it had brought him back to earth and then bounced him off it.

Ok. So now he turned up at the school. It was a sophisticated, wood clad and non-linear strip mall that they had chosen to put the school in, but it was still a strip mall. It was the least threatening environment in the world to any American. But now, as Jack parked the car, it might as well be a dark castle on a hill. The moon put strange streaks on everything. Large glass storefronts were big glossy webs all around. The school was lit with a flickering light from within: it was the candle lamps in the little room where Adam lived (in contravention of zoning.)

Jack opened the door and tried to sound reassuring, whistling and rattling his keys and saying "Hey buddy!" If a big Labrador had suddenly run up and leapt on him and licked him with its meat tongue, it would have seemed wholly appropriate.

"Yo, Adam. It's Jack-o. 'Sup, bro?"

Adam opened the door. It shushed open and he was silhouetted against the candles. He was in a tank top, ripped like meat, and with a big shadow over his face. Suddenly, Jack wondered why the hell this was not a "lunchtime at the skate park" meeting. Did anyone ever get killed in a strip mall in the middle of the night? Probably hundreds of people, just no one ever found out about it.

"Jack-o, come in man."

They opened up a brew in the Polaroid light. Two men, in a small twilight together.

"You know Hannah, right?"

"Of course: Drake's wife."

"Exactly. So, she... she has got this idea in her head. It's... well, it's bizarre. But on the other hand it could totally be true. It's just unlikely. You know: statistically. That's the only thing that is stopping it from being true."

"Is it about me?"

"Yes."

"Jack, I can't give you the answer you need. It's about Iraq, right?"

Jack suddenly remembered the first time he ejaculated inside a woman, and the feeling that something deep inside him had gone and could not be whistled back.

"Shit, Adam."

"I know as much as you do. A bit more."

"What do you mean?"

"About 6 months ago, I woke up on the beach here. I was smashed up all over. My head was all covered with scabs. I stank like fish. My memory was fucked. I remembered which one was Bert and which was Ernie. But anything that would allow me to pick up my life where I had left it was carefully gone. Real amnesia. No bullshit. And I didn't know that I had anything to hide. I really did want to remember where I came from. I knew how to survive, though. Foraging food and

also, I knew how to make people do what I wanted.

"I was hooked on the beach. It seemed safe, and also it seemed like a place where I could maybe find out the truth. I thought the truth would be great, you see.

"So I meditated, and I hooked up with spiritual people. Swingers, whatever. I got turned on to some powerful shit. Then one day, I was on this girl's couch. It was Sunday morning. For some reason I had shaved my beard off. I guess it was tickling her or something. On the couch, with no beard, I was starting to feel kind of normal. Like I didn't have to live on a beach forever. Like I had one time lived in a house with a couch and newspapers and... humans.

"So I read the paper. Something about food stamps on the front page. And something about American Idol. Then I see that for some reason they have stuck a small mirror on the front page. Kind of weird, or cool. Then I look again and it is just a photo of me on the front page. I'm lying on this L-shaped vinyl couch, and she is frying up tofu rancheros and I am learning that I am a Marine and maybe a war criminal.

"But none of this stuff sticks to me. I am not waking up. I read how that guy Patterson says that I, Bryan Jenkins, threw two guys in the pit and I was looking for girls to rape. Then I read this guy 'me' saying that I tried to talk everyone out of it, and never fired a shot.

"The paper had every detail in it. The names of the six dead. Descriptions of their injuries. Discussions of how the Marines dressed in black and sneaked out. It was almost like the guy who wrote it had been there, it was so vivid.

"Because I know this girl is not going to recognize or click, I ask her what she thinks about this missing Marine who jumped in the ocean. And she says 'It's Bush and Cheney who should be on trial. Those boys should have been camping up in Camp Pendleton... not getting bombed and going crazy. And yeah it sucks to get thrown in a ditch, but did you see what we did to Baghdad on the first night of the war? Shock and Awe! Industrial Death and Magic. I hope they never find that guy and he gets his head straight and doesn't kill anyone else.'

"Then she went back to her tofu. And I am... starting to think. I am thinking about the Buddha. About reincarnation. Karma. I think I tried to die in the ocean. And now I am back. I have the Karma to deal with. But I have lost the coral

reefs or ugly habits of following bad people that made the thing happen. And maybe I just did watch it. Maybe I wasn't looking for girls to rape. But either way I can't reach that. I am just... this copy of the hippies I have met in the last six months. I don't have any other personality anymore. I was reincarnated. I am the first definitely reincarnated man you have ever met.

"So what do you think? You like my life?"

Jack's face looked like hills. Meaningless lumps that got in your way.

"I think... I think it's total bullshit."

"What?"

"You heard me. Listen. We don't get off that easy. It isn't Bush and Cheney who should be on trial. It's me. I was reading fucking USA Today or something at the end of 2001 and there was an article about an inch tall that said 'Bush will Invade Iraq.' And I read it and said to myself. Nah... we wouldn't be so stupid. Then it started to happen. And I kept saying that to myself.

"You know what that article was? It was a vaccination. It was put there to give me the first bitter reaction and get over it. Then when all the WMD shit started, I was immunized. I didn't get out in the streets and mobilize. I did nothing. Literally nothing.

"Then we kill thousands of Iraqis. We are at war! For five years now. And if you didn't know, you couldn't fucking tell. And it's all my fault. It's my fault that you are a war criminal. It was me who put you and your buddies over there."

He suddenly went quiet. He was thinking of his honeymoon and the immaculate fancy underwear that Allie had worn that night. First and last time she would wear it. What was it made of? The finest silk or the fakest polyester. He couldn't tell. All he knew was that it wasn't cotton and it wasn't her. They left it on while they did it for the first time with wedding rings on, in a little hotel room in a big black pyramid in the middle of a desert.

"So," said Adam "what are we going to do?"

"You need to go back up to Camp Pendleton, man."

"But I have no memory. And those other guys want to screw me over. I don't want to end up in front of the firing squad with bullets that should have their names on it. I don't want this life to end like that."

Jack looked out of the window. Sodium light and pick-up trucks and palm frond silhouettes. That was all he got. Bullshit.

"That's an excellent point. That's an excellent point. Because -- and don't tell anyone you heard this from me -- it's possible that this is the only life we get."

What were they going to do? In amber light. Too calm. Romantic, if you were to look at it long enough: two handsome guys lingering on deep thoughts with beers in the dark where no one went.

"Fuck the ocean!" yelled Jack.

He stood up to leave.

"Adam. I am sorry I came here tonight. I get where you are at. With no memory, you just gotta go forward. I have to get my life straight now. I have to fix the things that I can fix. I need to not get vaccinated again.

"Let's get rich. It's not a bad way to get rich. These women... they could be just... rotting in front of the TV. Instead, they are... considering spiritual life."

Jack left on that line, with a dude nod.

He knew he was wrong. He knew that letting everyone play personal Jesus was a mistake. He knew that humans should be discouraged from godlike pretensions, in case they succeeded. But -- well -- the die was cast and once cast there were some things he could no longer see. You can see everything when you are born and you work your way down from there.

Jack rode home, coming up with a plan to control, then rescue his wife and then move to Mexico, where they would enter a cocoon together.

Chapter 14

Hannah typed everything up. Everything she knew, everything she suspected. She knew that Allie had become a sociopath and that Jack was in denial. And

that murders had been carried out. So she printed out her report: three pages. The printer snarled the pages out.

Hannah felt the paper and then moved her head back as the ink fumes hushed up from it.

She read the paragraphs that would destroy Allie's life, Jack's life, maybe ruffle her own life up a bit. They were well written, she had to concede. Factual, but with enough personal, human detail that you felt the urgency of rescuing these people.

She folded the pages trifold and she did it well. She searched out the correct envelope and filled it with the letter. Solemn precision marked her actions, as if she were filling the syringe of the lethal injection.

At that thought she paused. She didn't like injections. In fact, she was terrified of them. And they were in so many movies! What was up with that? Did normal people find that 'edgy' still? Surely not.

So now she was out of her zone. She couldn't do this to Allie. If she sent this to the doctors at the hospital, Allie would eventually end up in jail.

So instead, she worked very hard to scrub it anonymous and printed it again and drove to a post office quite far away, and met a faceless machine there and paid cash -- for some reason -- and mailed it to Allie. A harsh dose of truth would maybe stop her from killing any more people, and she could go on with her life. And that was what people did for their friends, bizarrely enough.

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Meanwhile Drake had become impatient and had that horse rider girl stretched backwards over a bale of hay with jodhpurs around her ankles. Her abdomen was extended and tense. It was long and beautiful and its muscles were not grossly split. Its skin could not at all remind anyone of a walrus pelt. Inside, like a beautiful peach, was a fertile womb that could reset his family project: deliver an heir.

She spread her legs and waited. He was primed.

"I don't have AIDS," he said.

"Yet!" she joked. This was a bit off his model of what she was supposed to be. He did not want a vulgar party girl. This was going to be a real wife. Yet he admired her healthy dirtiness. There was horseshit all around them, they were grimy and sweaty from the ride. She was naturally ready for him. She had a natural ripeness. She was young, but in a way that did not make him feel old. He lined himself up and got to work on impregnating her. Borrowing a cue from all those freaks he had been surrounding himself with, he began to imagine strong, ruthless sperms with roadmaps and itineraries... who would not stop at Denny's because they did not have kids or wives. They were SPERM!

--

Allie was at work. She reflected on her life. She had her car, she had her job and was expecting that promotion any day now. She had detached from Jack and was actively visualizing him with that filthy slut Candy. No wait, she had to let go of the judgment. She was visualizing him finding what he needed with Candy. Then she would be with Isaak. They would have a long distance relationship at first, then she would start to work at a top plastic surgery clinic in Beverly Hills. Then she would not have to visualize larger, perter breasts; simply order them with an employee discount and a rich man's credit card. Gavin would take it well. He was wiser than all of them, and would see that they were all progressing and opening up channels for him.

As for her patients... it was true that at some point a new nurse would arrive who didn't have the strength and knowledge to focus her energies just on those who could take the seed and let it grow. She would waste her seeds in the dark earth. But what could one do? Perhaps she could drop some hints on how to figure the patients out.

Well, you can't do everything. She headed to her next appointment.

--

Isaak was on a yacht. He had a feeling -- a certainty -- that the global economy was about to crash hard. When he got off this yacht, he had about five hundred people to fuck over. Some were real grudges that he was going to enjoy and that would warm him even if he blew it and ended up in jail or a gutter. Others were more what you would call Low Hanging Fruit. Others could even be termed collateral damage. Drake and Jack were in one of the latter categories.

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Jack was looking over his contract with Drake and figuring out if he had done enough work to keep his equity share if he headed down to Mexico suddenly. Looked like he had to put in about three more weeks of work to do that. Reading the contract was taxing and unpleasant work for him and would turn out to be a total waste of time. But the very act of thinking hard has its rewards. While thinking hard, all thoughts of auras and abundance and collapsing dimensions faded. Actions were being evaluated based on the intersection of multiple wants, needs and gallons of random factors. There was no California shit involved. There was no OCD God micromanaging his billion little action figures in a battle of selfishness.

The next thing he needed to figure out was how to talk Allie into agreeing. His proposal was that she do massage at a resort, since she had a certificate in that from before she got serious about her nursing. He couldn't rule out her trapping obese people in saunas or whatever, but it seemed like a safer vocation on the whole.

--

Adam was a bit disturbed talking about his past. He took his bike out for a ride, down past Swami's, down past the wall of living room lights over the lagoon, down to dog beach. It was getting dark and the dogs were starting to act up --

sensing the night -- and pack behavior emerged. A German shepherd held a shaggy mongrel down by his neck skin. He was tired and stopped. The thing about Adam was that his life seemed less inevitable to him than most people's lives do. He was scared to do certain backwards-facing things, but other than that he had to make an effort each day to be who he was being and to do what he was doing. At the end of the day, he looked inside himself and asked: what is tomorrow going to be. He came to the conclusion that these schools could really make a difference. That the basic training they were doing up there in the Camp needed a counterweight down here. And if they were training up weak-wristed women down here then so what? Give women some strength. That made more sense than raising a tribe of Athenians down here to do battle with the Spartans. His war now was to protect these fragile but important seeds of wisdom. He was the sheepdog.

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Violet had a horrible dream. That dead soldier was under her bed, all wet and smelly.

Chapter 15

"Thanks for looking after Gav," said Jack as he got ready to leave Hannah and Drake's house.

Hannah looked small. Her hair was redder than usual. Her eyes were a funny grayish color that you didn't see very often and was quite beautiful. Jack noticed that he was noticing her.

Allie sat in the car. She had got in it very quickly, hadn't she? She was messing around with the sun visor: the sun was at an aggressive angle right now. She was looking good too. She had put her hair up and was showing off her long neck. Tonight, though, it looked a little like her head could be pushed right off it.

Where do these thoughts come from?

Anyway, time to hug Hannah goodbye. She was cold: physically cold. And stiff like a stick.

"Hey Hannah, are you okay to look after Gavin tonight? Are you feeling okay? We can put this dinner off no problem."

"No, you guys go and have your fun. It would be just me and Violet otherwise and she's been a bit... mentally... edgy, lately."

"Where's Dr Drake at?"

"Whoring."

"Hmm."

"Don't worry. I am not going to make a scene. Not that kind of whoring. He got called up to see Isaak about something."

"Really? Okay. Hmm. I guess he'll catch us up later. Oh listen, I want to talk to

you about Adam later. I errr... well shit, I don't know what I did there actually. Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Sure. Now go have a lovely night."

"You too. You know what I mean."

Hannah waved them off, in her chainmail-looking long cardigan.

"Are you falling in love with your friend's wife?" asked Allie, incredulously. It had only just occurred to her, yet in retrospect they had always been a bit pally.

"No," answered Jack as he reversed out into the street. That was a demanding move, so he didn't put much intonation into his 'no.' He would have been better served to say "What? No way, you crazy bitch! She's a ginger-haired neurotic! And I think she has skin cancer."

Allie fumed as they drove to the mid-fancy Italian restaurant. How dare he? How dare he treat her like this? He deserved everything she had recently been picturing for him.

They got to the restaurant and got a great view. The fringy, tufty coastline and the big bulging blue mass of sea that looked ready to pop. They both didn't know what to think of that kite they could see. It was itching the sky.

Jack ordered a good wine and was just pouring on the charm. His eye contact was impeccable: intimate, but not intense. His cologne was butch but with fruity afternotes. He ordered without asking Allie what she wanted, but with keen notice to her body language to make sure he was getting it right. She knew he knew that she liked this kind of treatment. That spoiled it a bit -- that he knew -- but she was still sucked into it a bit. She looked around and decided to treat tonight as a hologram of her future life. Being genuinely rich with a husband she genuinely admired.

They started eating and Jack started saying the weirdest things. Things about Mexico.

"I'm just thinking... there is this other culture just right by us. I think we can go down there and kind of... wash away what we are now. We can be you and me and Gavin and none of these hangers-on. You were right about 'Totally Real': it's

poisonous.

"You can live pretty good down there for cheap. You know I am good with my hands. I found this land for us about ten miles from Rosarito. Ocean view, and there is already water and a small shack and everything. And the weather will be good for another threes months or so. I can have a great place for us. We can grow our own organic garden.

"I will be a handyman for gringos and you can do massage at this resort. I called them and they are interested."

Allie looked in horror. She was at a table with two wine glasses, one big breadbasket and three conflicting realities. There was the reality they had walked in with, the one that she was incubating and then this awful Frankenstein monster that Jack had been hammering away on without her knowing.

Suddenly it made sense. The blackmail letter!

"I got your letter, by the way. You are pathetic."

Jack was totally blindsided. He had not run a game plan for anything other than outright rejection or quiet contemplation.

"I should have known it was you. It's so like you. To spy on me. To watch me and watch me and watch me. And learn nothing. Then to make me a monster."

It's a sloppy universe we live in. So much of it seems superfluous and improvised. However, sometimes things happen in a very suggestive way: like the sun rapidly dropping beneath the ocean and plunging the world into complete darkness just at that very second.

"I don't know what you are talking about, love. I haven't sent you a letter. And... I kind of think I know what this letter is about, but I... we never need to talk about that."

"Because we are just going to learn all new Spanish words and never have to talk about any of this stuff again! Is that it? ¿Estás loco, hijo de puta?"

Jack was not keeping a tight track of this, but it seemed like they caused a scene in about 60 -- 70 % of the restaurants they visited together. This scene looked to

be a good one because the busboys were laughing already.

"Enjoy your dinner," she said and then quietly started eating. The salmon flesh parted around the knife. It shone pink, surprised to be dead.

Jack froze for a couple of minutes, thinking that he neither wanted to talk to Allie nor to let things stay as they were. Just a little -- a tiny inkling that could never be acted upon -- he began to get that feeling people get when they conclude it would be a good idea to murder rather than divorce their spouse.

He decided to eat. He chopped up a chicken breast. His mind turned to the night Adam and his friends drove out to Ahmed Mulaji's house and left a pile of corpses behind them. And then he thought about the suicide bombing a week before that night which had almost killed Adam and had shredded his friends up and spread them over a thirty-foot radius. Who cleaned that kind of thing up?

He began to wonder if being a vegetarian would work for him? He had an opinion, which he had only ever shared covered by jokes, that vegetarians were just scared of human flesh, living or dead. He thought that more vegetarians were spawned by watching 'miracle of birth' videos than by listening to 'Meat is Murder.'

And now, he couldn't eat. He was thinking about the slow, panicky death of people in hospitals who were not quite getting the medicine that their charts said they were. And about two nurses working together to lift off the bodies, which were surprisingly frail and light and just felt like a large pile of leather jackets like at a party. One of the nurses was all business. The other nurse was more like a fisherman holding up a big mouth bass for a photo.

Dessert was on the horizon.

He looked up at her. Her jaw line was a triumph of the world. Beautiful on her face, it would also be beautiful as a bridge or a rainbow. So, even though she wore an expression that was dangerous and dense, he enjoyed the moment.

Just as he was about to talk, she started to talk.

"I have found another man," she said.

"What are you talking about?" was his scornful reply. He felt the cat's paw on his

back, playing with him, and he didn't like it.

"A real man."

"This 'real man' shit again?"

"Having a nice tool kit doesn't make you a man, Jack. Power makes you a man. Being Drake's handyman doesn't count."

"You're leaving me for Drake?"

"Oh God, no."

"I know about your text messages. I decided that it was harmless fun."

"You are pathetic. Is that what you would say if a rapist broke into our house?"

Jack gestured for the check. He knew that Allie was a fiend for dessert, but he felt a responsibility to the human race to get the hell out of that restaurant.

"Anyway," she said, "this is all for the best. I know that you never wanted to get married."

The check was coming, as was the next ice age. Jack was starting to have the horrible feeling that when he woke up tomorrow, this would not all be forgotten.

"You've never been interested in my life, have you? God you haven't even asked who it is that I am leaving you for!"

"Oh, you're right! I should pay more attention to your hobby! But... let's just take this one 'offline' okay? People are enjoying dinner."

"Are they? Are they really?"

"I think so."

--

Eventually they managed to get out of there and back in the car.

"Isaak!" she said, triumphantly.

Jack felt a horrible tickle in his belly as he drove away from the ocean in the car they had dreamed into being together. It was as if she had suddenly said "I'm going to marry Peter Pan!"

"You... you haven't even met him except that one time. Have you?"

All the little lights on the dashboard were spread out in front of him. He remembered a trip down to Baja just before he and Allie had met, when he swam amid bioluminescent bacteria and felt enough like a god.

"Have you?"

"It's not really any of your business," she said.

They were almost at Hannah's house. Allie was dicking around with her phone.

"Hannah says she can keep Gavin tonight," she said "Take me home then you can go and find somewhere."

Jack swallowed a big 'what!?' Some time apart would probably be good. He had plenty of friends with couches and most of those couches had PlayStations by them. If your friend had a PlayStation, he often didn't mind you coming over to stay for long periods. It had been a while since she had kicked him out of his house, but it was like riding a bicycle.

He dropped her off and grabbed a few things and got the keys to the old car.

On his way out he said, "Is there any chance that you are going to... kill yourself or something?"

She scornfully looked at him. "What is this? Covering your ass? 'Oh, I asked! I asked!'

"No. I am not. Idiot. I told you my plan."

He couldn't leave just yet. He mused aloud, "I wonder who did send that letter?"

"Jesus Christ," she said, in a very ambiguous tone.

He left the house, which looked more like a shack than usual. Was he detaching?

Was this the real break up? With Gavin far away, it seemed an easy and logical thing to do.

He took a left turn and saw he was low on gas. He pulled into the gas station. He had a text message from Candy that said "Im at the lodge. U know how to get there."

He pumped the gas. The sky was wet and heavy. His life was heavy and messy. Candy's lodge was probably freaking awesome.

Chapter 16

On his way back from L.A., Drake stopped off at 'Totally Real'. Perhaps Adam was used to unannounced nighttime visits by now: he didn't seem surprised at all to see Drake.

"Adam Adam Adam. We need to talk."

Adam suggested they walk and talk on the beach. This was because the smell of vodka coming off Drake's skin was nauseating. The stiff nighttime ocean breeze took care of that. Drake stumbled over cobbles and spoke incoherently.

"So I talked to Isaak. He's fucked. I don't know if you keep up with this stuff but the economy basically just fell off a cliff. Like, the whole economy. It turns out we weren't as rich as we were playing. The super-rich guys were just letting out the line before reeling us in. Isaak is going to jail tomorrow. I guess his name was picked out of the hat to be fall guy for some minor shady shit. The real players will stay out of trouble, of course.

"Anyway, the reason I mention this is that I am totally fucked. My situation... my 'situación' with the Mexican government is coming to a head. It looks like I am not a big enough gangster for my little money-laundering scheme to work. So they want a lot of money. Then there is the money I sank in the Santa Monica thing, based on Isaak... anyway, you get it. You are a smart guy. I already gave you the executive summary: I. Am. Fucked.

"I would say that Jack is fucked too, but y'know... I can see him being happy in a trailer park. Or even in jail: weightlifting and similar activities. So let's not spend an undue amount of time pondering our friend Jack. Let's think about me getting raped in a Tijuana slammer. That's not the name of a delicious cocktail, either,

my quiet friend.

"No one wants to go to jail. Not me, not you. Especially not you, right? I am not 100% sure what your story is, but I know you don't want to go to jail."

There wasn't much to say about what was going on. The sound of the ocean was consistent and expected. The darkness masked their faces, but they were also consistent and expected: sociopathic smile versus Zen wall. But Adam did seem to be a bit shaken. It was hard to say what the symptoms were. Perhaps the rhythm of his stride.

"You are right. I don't want to go to jail. Are you going to send me there? People have been talking to you about me, huh?"

Actually they hadn't: this was all a bluff on Drake's part, based on a hunch he had.

"Well, look: You are a cool guy. I don't have the bromance thing going with you like Jack, but I know it is not you that is fucking me over here. I don't want to mess with you. But this little happy bubble... this game of being Players... it's suddenly over. You are going back to hobo land tomorrow one way or the other. But there is a way you can head out with a few K in your pocket and can keep me in my lovely home too. And get some revenge on the corrupt insurance companies. Social justice, man!"

Adam stopped walking.

"I'm avoiding justice, man. I mean not just like avoiding the cops. I don't want any Karma. I am trying to keep neutral until my memory comes back at least. If it ever does."

"Well, forget the justice angle. Let's be pragmatic. All I want is for you to act extra crazy tomorrow round town, so everyone notices. Then I want you to go back to the school and torch it.

"The beauty is, I couldn't have planned it any better than to have a weird hobo planted there. Usually if the place burns down, they'd look right at me, but here you get the blame and there is a 75% chance that I get the insurance payout I need to pay off the federales and keep my head above water.

"Shit... I was really looking forward to getting divorced. Now it is going to be a real pain.

"Look, Adam. One word, ok? 'Impermanence.'

"So, are you in?"

"To tell you the truth, I am thinking I would rather just leave now. I don't want to burn any buildings down."

Drake was quiet for a bit.

"Yeah, what was I thinking? This walk was a good idea. Y'know I think I am just freaking out. It'll be all right. I'll just file bankruptcy or something. Okay, let's turn around now."

They walked back to the school. All across America that night, unscrupulous men were scheming like this. And of course, Drake was lying to Adam now. He was not going to do the right thing here.

Chapter 17

"Sometimes, when you are waking up, do you have the feeling that important revelations are dripping away from you like egg yolk from a badly cracked shell? Then you get out of bed, and the fingers of your brain are madly scrambling to retain them. You might be brushing your teeth at this point. You look at the mirror: your face is distorted by the brush. Your eyes are almost dead. You give up.

"Over breakfast, you think about it for a second. The sense that there was something unusually important and true that you missed out on by waking up just then because you needed to pee, and by not having a notebook by your bed.

"You dismiss it and you go off to work, and at bed-time when it all flashes back to you for a second you dismiss it as something that was just caused by the smell of your hair oil on the pillow: a Proust moment

"But I have bad news for you (for me): you are wrong. There are important revelations that come as you wake up. Time is flexible at that point, and so is your identity. I am starting to think it's naïve to think that midnight then 8 hours

of blackness then off to breakfast is a realistic model. Where do you go when you are asleep?

"All these visualization classes assume that the universe is listening to a little person in a kitchen, wishing with a full heart.

"Maybe, instead what happens is you sleep and your consciousness goes where it is needed. Perhaps you need to give yourself a flashback in the future to save your life. Perhaps you need a déjà vu in the past to save yourself from a bad decision. Or to soften it at least. Maybe, every night, your soul plays superhero and flies around your world, going forwards and backwards, making the little changes that it can.

"But the only catch is that there are many worlds, branching like broccoli. The busy soul can only make statistical changes and your life can be as awful as ever on the face of it: in a single moment of time."

--

Hannah wrote all that in her "ecosystem" recycled notebook on the edge of her bed before she could get up. Her little white legs did not touch the ground and she throbbed with Irish beauty. She looked at her heirloom mirror. She was getting more Irish everyday. The Spanish skin from her Dad's side was fading. She would die Irish and pale, choked on rosary beads, alone, while Drake was in a spaceship. That was the thing she consistently brought back from her journeys: that Drake would -- over time and after horrible setbacks -- get very rich and then head off to space. With only one eye and with a face twisted by fossils of emotions. Nevertheless he would eventually get so rich that the planet would eject him.

She read the notes again. That last part reminded her of something she had read in a novel. Also, she had no idea what to do with that broccoli she had in the fridge.

She got out of bed and her head started to stop spinning.

Breakfast was the anchor. Not just the hunger breaker but the dream breaker. Chewing and munching like a spider or a rat would settle down any spinning brain.

So she chewed and munched.

Drake had left the house suspiciously early that morning. He had twitched in bed all night. She made no pretence to be a psychic, but it was clear something was going on in the world. She had seen the look on Allie's face the night before: Allie had been looking right through her and knew all about the letter. And poor Jack had walked face-first into that fan, probably. She suspected that Gavin had not been left with her so that his parents could enjoy a night of lovely sex.

Then Jack had mentioned something about having done something about the situation with Adam. So there was that. Then she had heard something on the radio about the global economy being on the brink of collapse.

The children were playing nicely. They were pretending they were the only two people in the world and going round the house giving everything a new name. The bigger armchair was the "gonflu" but the smaller one was the "wizapl." They weren't that different in size even, really.

She chopped radishes and let them play on. Maybe she would get a phone call from Allie or Jack soon, but they were flakey at the best of times. It was a near certainty that Gavin would be with them for lunch and she knew he loved radishes. They were hotcold, he said.

Chopping up and down she remembered a big tapestry she had made for a production of "Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore" back when she was living in Paris. When she had finished that -- when she put the last stitch in -- the tapestry and perhaps even the universe had audibly 'pinged.' There was no question of adding another patch of color, or of removing anything. It was her masterwork and it was done.

She had not grasped the implication that her life was now ready to wind down and go quietly away from her. It was about a week later that she had met Drake acting like a clueless idiot to pick up girls in that little bar in the Marais that was also a bookshop. He was basically feigning illiteracy and two or three women were falling for it and competing to mock him. They did not know the Toreador move, but she was a bit wiser than them because she was 27 rather than 21. She looked at it all with a mocking eye. Three hours later they were in bed together, and that perplexed her to this day. There was possibly another more advanced move that she had been trapped by. The double-reverse-fake-matador.

She wondered where that tapestry was now. She had a little faded clipping -- a review of the play -- that had spent two paragraphs raving about the set design and especially the tapestry and the way it rendered the characters even more two dimensional, like words walking on the stage.

A little later, while playing with the kids and some glue and summoning up the courage to wipe away a white slug of snot from Gavin's upper lip -- which almost stopped her heart -- she heard a weird buzzsaw noise from her little office. Of course she went to investigate. She walked down the long hardwood corridor. Each step seemed to take longer. It was one of those days when time was lumpy, grumpy and in the way of things.

She came upon Drake grinding up CDs in his shredder, while dicking around with her laptop.

"Darling, what are you doing?"

"Hygiene, ma princesse. Just getting rid of unnecessary back ups, making sure we have all the data we need."

"Well, that's nice of you. My Mac has been running a bit slow lately. And my email is all weird... my Sent Items is always out of sync with my phone."

"Well, okay that is too hard. I'll get Hassan to come over and look at that. Well... this is probably shooting PVC particles in the air, right? You better get out and close the door so the kids don't get any. I'll open a window."

He was right. She backed out lightning fast. Maybe Drake would not live to 100 after all. Maybe he was not bulletproof and Teflon coated after all. To think she touched that Teflon each night.

Perhaps it was over between them. She thought of him in that PVC particle cancer cloud and wished bad wishes. And she went back to looking after the two kids on her own and this new, arbitrary and incomplete family pleased and satisfied her, even though they were speaking to her only in their new language and treating her like a cow from space. It was working.

Suddenly Drake burst out of the office. His hair was not smooth and his smile was loose at the edges. He was moving faster than his feet and his telephone looked really heavy.

"Can I get you some food, Drake? Or a coffee?"

"I have a few things to do. I'll probably be back after midnight."

"But..."

"Trust me. I am an OB-GYN!" was his strange parting line.

Time passed: no one came to get Gavin. She got used to having two kids. She arranged her day. She enjoyed folding her organic cotton sheets. She danced to a piece of music she liked when it came on the radio. She examined her young wrinkles in a mirror.

There came a knock at the door. It was Jack. He looked kind of rough, a touch delirious. But not like a crazy man. He looked frivolous, though.

"Oh yeah, excuse me. I slept at the office last night," he said after accepting her offer of a cup of tea.

"Oh really," she said, and tried not to pry.

"Yeah, Adam let me crash in his closet."

"That doesn't sound too gay."

"Don't ask, don't tell."

They laughed until the double meaning of secret lives came in and then they laughed through that too.

He told her all of the shitty stuff that had happened to him the last couple of days. He even told her how he had called Candy and a woman called Lucida had answered the phone. He'd remembered her as one of the people who got rejected from his list of people to work at the school. That was because he was a bit of a prude about the his-and-hers crystal dildo that she was going to need to use in her class.

That woke him up: he did not want to go in a crystal dildo direction. He wanted to go the direction that was away from that. So he ended up at the backroom at 'Totally Real'.

"Adam was kind of quiet. I didn't want to talk about his trial or anything, so there wasn't much else to talk about. It's funny: when he started talking about himself the other day... it didn't sound like him.

"Anyway, I will stay there for a couple more days and then I have a plan to go stay with this guy I know for a few weeks."

She looked right at him. He was sad, but okay with that.

"I'll take Gavin back to his mom's place in a little while. She should be home soon. Then I called our old babysitter. She can help out. I guess Allie will be okay with that."

She turned her teacup around.

"He can stay here tonight, too, if that is okay with Allie. Wait, Jack. That's it? You're... over?"

"I think so. No... I am sure. I can't fix it. I can't fix her. I can't really LEAVE, leave cause she is crazy -- sorry, I know she's your friend -- and I need to watch out for Gavin. But I don't want to fight to bring her back to reality. And anyway, I would be a hypocrite. I just spent months telling people just like her that they can make reality do whatever they want it to do, right? Shit, this blackmail letter, though. That's going to mess things up."

She didn't hesitate. It made sense to tell him the truth. He was surprised but then he got it. He nodded.

"Ok. I get it."

"I had to get it out of our lives."

"No, I get it. So what about Adam? You have a letter for him?"

"No. He's... on the run already, right? Eventually it'll catch up with him. I don't see him doing any more war crimes."

"You don't think he is reborn? I mean... he has the karma to carry, but he seems... to be a new man."

"I had a long think about this, and then I had some dishes to do and there are big men with helicopters and things looking for him, so I just dropped it in the end."

"That's a good point. And if we all go to jail for harboring a fugitive?"

"Then we'll all probably do a lot of yoga."

Chapter 18

Allie got a phone call. She was arranging her home. Everything had to have a purpose in it now, like a crystal that would amplify her will. All of the crap had to go. Man toys had to go. Then the phone rang and she saw it was Drake and she was intrigued.

"Drake?"

"Yes, it's Drake. I need to meet with you quick."

"This is Allie, not Jack."

"I know. I'm parked outside your house."

"What? Get out of your car, lazy ass!"

"No. Meet me at that gang-banger park on the corner."

She put on a small amount of make-up for the meeting. She walked to the park. The sun was warming the dirty pastel walls of the houses of her street. HER street.

A couple of minutes later, Drake was blackmailing her on a gritty concrete bench.

"So, don't think of this as blackmail. You know -- we will still be friends. We always had a little spark, right? But I really need this done and Adam is not going for it. And I would do it myself; only it would be so obvious. You know I always hate to do the obvious thing."

She was looking at him impassively. It was not fake: she was fearless inside.

"Well, okay. So Jack wouldn't even come and do his dirty work himself?"

"Huh?"

"Okay. So you have got something on me. Maybe. What do you think Isaak would say if he found out what you are trying to do to me?"

Drake brushed his hand through his long hair. He took a long time and the fingers looked like white horses returning to a burned down forest. More than anything that had happened to him in the last week, this was the conversation that was tapping his bone marrow.

"Isaak? ISAAK Isaak? Well, I don't think he would care much, on balance, since he is going to jail today and he ain't coming out anytime soon. And who are you to him anyway. No one's drunk anymore, baby."

She felt gut punched. Like when her Dad would get her good, because she thought he had really stopped doing it this time and she had dropped her guard around him. She was alone. She had made herself alone. She knew why people did that, what they wanted. What they got.

The sunshine that fell on the leaves would kill her if she lay in it for a whole day like they did. The sunshine was a weapon if you let it take you over. Everything was.

"Allie. C'mon. I need an answer."

"Okay. I'll burn it down. You have to tell me how though. I was never good at fires."

"I Googled it at the library. It's surprisingly easy. And you are awesome, smart and will get good money out of this."

"I don't want to talk anymore. Except you tell me how to do the fire and then go."

"Awesome."

--

Drake also had a job for Hannah to do. He was going to have a little meeting tonight with the top teachers and Jack and get them all up to speed on the new

business plan and he just needed lots of delivery pizza and to stick the kids in front of a Pixar creation.

"New business plan?"

"I thought you didn't like to hear about all this boring stuff. You can pick the toppings!"

"Is this to do with this economic crisis thing? Are we going to be poor?"

She felt pure, ice-cubes-in-the-mouth terror.

"Okay, honey: we are going to restructure our debt, downsize the operation and basically tide this thing out. That's what the meeting is about. So I think no European vacation next year but unless that is your definition of poverty -- which it well might be -- then no, we are not going to be poor."

Strangely the ice cubes did not go away.

The thought of several seasons of...

being alive...

hung around her.

Drake was on the phone now.

"Jackie. Where you at, homes, you sound like you just woke up? You did? Rocky! I need you hitting the punch bags! We got a big fight coming up. Listen, I need you to come down to my place tonight 8pm. Big meeting. Direction change. Santa Monica is not going to happen. Look, I'll tell you it all tonight.

"What do you mean sick? Sick of... dude, are you on drugs? This is not the Jack I know.

"Get your ass down here at 8 o'clock. Or come earlier: you should know before the rest of the schmucks. I mean... you know what I mean.

"I am not reading you, my brother.

"No... fuck you, you pissy baby. Stay home and beat off or whatever the fuck it

is you want to do. Or, grow up and get here at 7.30 and be a businessman. Business. MAN!"

He turned his phone off and all of his anger was folded up and put in a pocket. Hannah had seen that before and this time she decided she would Google it to see if it was a sign of sociopathy. Actually, she had a little list of symptoms to check for in her purse, didn't she?

"Jack is not coming tonight. He is burned out, I guess. Never really had to work before in his life."

Drake picked up the phone and called a hot yoga instructor. Then the kids came in and needed more food. Cucumbers, even!

Drake was gone when she was done with the cucumber thing. She had been talked into peeling it: she felt very tender empathy for young Gavin since his home was breaking up, even though he didn't know it yet. She remembered that. She remembered the awful burden of having to think about all sorts of things that had previously just hung around and let you stand on them.

Gavin was a quiet one. And so young, and with the most beautiful eyes. Hannah didn't know what to make of him. He got on well with Violet, which was rare and welcome. She dragged him around like a blankie most of the time but there were also times when he would sit and tell her little stories and she would beam, warmed by the candle of his imagination.

Up at the beach, Adam and Jack were playing Frisbee. It was 4 pm: the bitching hour! This was like some commercial for man tampons, they were having so much fun. They barely spoke a word that could not have been replaced with a variation of "Dude!"

Women were attracted by their pheromones, and came around to lick at them, but before long they realized that something weird was going on, some kind of knife-fight without knives so they took their bikini-filling elsewhere.

Jack eventually said something bumpy to Adam. This was while they were eating veggie burritos five minutes from the beach. He said, "What's next for you, man?"

Adam calmly thought -- or whatever -- about his answer. "Back to the beach, I

guess," he said.

"What's with you and the beach?" asked Jack, with one eye on snagging a communal bottle of Jalapeño sauce.

Adam thought -- or whatever -- again. "I died in the desert. The body, the soul, remembers things like that. It's the new theory of evolution. Rats exposed to bright lights turn on genetic flags."

"I hate the first guy who said 'I can do all the things I want to do with rats, and I don't have to go to jail,'" said Jack.

Adam smiled his rare smile. "This has been a great day, man," he said.

Jack agreed and said he had to break and crash. Adam wanted to meditate up at Swami's and get strength for the new world where his past was partially exposed. Jack got that and headed back to the office to crash. He was exhausted, probably all the months of crazy work catching up on him. On the way home he fantasized about screwing the

near-perfect body of Candy, in a right-sized orgy where his cock was in the top three. But it kept unraveling and rewinding and instead he was holding hands with Hannah. Holding hands!

And it was great.

He went to sleep on a fold-up bed, in direct contravention of zoning, in a timeless directionless state. He would not have been surprised to wake up anytime, anywhere, anyone.

Several hours passed. At Drake's house the Pizzas and several teachers arrived. Mainly the women. Since this was just a façade to establish his lack of motivation or opportunity for arson, he saw no reason to have creepy guys in his house.

Drake played them all and he played his wife then he played with the kids a little bit and then he jetted off a quick text to his fiancée, talking about a trip to Jamaica.

The teachers were talking about Obama and McCain and the markets crashing.

They had theories about it starting at drinking unfiltered tap-water and going downhill from there. Drake paced around and wondered if Allie was going to fuck things up tonight or if he was about to engineer a miracle escape, as he often did.

Allie was just then pulling into the parking lot not far from 'Totally Real' as Drake had these thoughts. It was quite dark already, and most of the shops had closed. Drake suggested she get started at around 9.30, so she waited a bit. Her mind was all about the job at hand. About how she would go through the back door, and drag some silks through from the Tea Room to the big closet where they had all of the paint cans. Drake had told her that it would be best if it didn't look too arsony, but since it was all going to be pinned on a crazed Iraq War criminal anyway, it frankly didn't matter and if she wanted to kill a hobo and throw him in there too, then he would be okay with that.

She was so offended by the way he had said that. She was not a serial killer. Except in the most technical and pedantic definition of the term.

But for the first time in a long time, she didn't really know what it was that she was and what it was that she would be. She had invested a lot of energy in the Isaak visualization: this had proved to be a bad investment. Perhaps the universe was having an abundance liquidity crisis, reflecting or causing the financial bank insurance thingy that was going on. But the universal laws were the universal laws. Tomorrow she would start work on the new Allie. Surely she could be allowed one dark night of meaninglessness, one night as a puppet, and then tomorrow head towards a new vision. Stronger and more free. Perhaps this line that she was being pushed across was a good one to cross.

She had asked him what to do about Adam possibly being in the building at the time. He had said to just throw a rock through the window as she was about to leave and his Iraq War training would make him jump up and escape. She bought that.

9.30 came, so she got up and set out on her work, just like a night at the hospital putting all the right things in all the right places.

She was dressed in gray, not black. She got that from the web too. Black stands out in an urban setting. But she was wearing black gloves; soft leather ones that had an Audrey Hepburn kind of look about them, which she had found at a thrift

store in North Park. With the gloves on -- with the second skin -- everything started to feel easier. She simply had to let herself in and drag a couple of pieces of wood around. She was so quiet and started to enjoy herself. Let's say that Adam caught her: what could he do. He was the compromised man and she was the compromised woman. They cancelled each other out. Plus he was kind of dumb and might not even grasp what she was doing. "It's a craft project. For grown ups," she could say.

Soon it was done. A crafty pile indeed. Twenty minutes work that would throw away months of work. Or, rescue it: cash it in. If something like this was a crime, while a big insurance company was bringing the country down and we were paying for it: well then there was no justice. And she believed that there was justice.

She stepped back and threw a match in. The silks burned avidly, with joy, with beautiful colors. But not for long. The flames arced big and high along them to the torn up 'Bibles' and the bamboo canes and the little pile of paper-mâché Buddhas. Suddenly a swarm of smoke surged from the ceiling, catching her. She did not panic. She felt the heat in front so she moved back. She had breath in her lungs and she had no fear. She could see tomorrow crisply for the first time. She was seeing that big pyramid building up in San Francisco. She didn't know why it was calling her, didn't know what she would do when she got there, but she knew that the universe had answered her question. The universe gave her a doorknob just in time and she emerged with a gasp.

In the cold, humid parking lot she closed the door tight and started to walk away. She had a small cute shopping bag with her and would not look out of place at all. But she kept the gloves on.

She threw the rock through the window and began her escape. She really took her time. She wanted to see flames from the outside of the building before she drove away. So she was only about 2/3 the way to the 4Runner when she saw one of the side windows pop and a red tongue arrogantly flash out and brag to the world what it was doing in there.

"JAAAAAAAAAACK!" she heard and jumped with terror. What the fuck? What was that name doing here? She looked up and saw Adam running from the direction of the high street, military fast, right at the fire.

She ran too, and she was figuring out that Jack had not gone off with that bitch Candy. He was too... whatever... and had crawled up here instead. And she ran and she ran and screamed and cried and did not want Jack to die at her hands.

Adam was running around the perimeter of the school when she got there. Each time he was pushed back by flame. She looked at the neighboring esthetician's office and hoped the flames would be stopped by the narrow alleyway. And then she grabbed Adam by the arm and screamed.

"Jack's in there? Jack's in there????"

He didn't even question her presence. It made enough sense and he was enough distracted by the massive destruction.

"Yeah. He crashed! Fuck! The ground floor is all on fire. What do we do? What do we do?"

He looked up to the second floor windows and the gutter next to them. His training came to him, his love of his comrades. He grabbed the gutter and started to climb.

"No! Wait! You can't go in there!!! You'll die."

"Been there, done that," he said and monkeyed up. He kicked out a window and there was no big flash of flame or too much smoke.

"It's cool. It's survivable up there," he said and he clambered in, stopping for a second to untie the bandana from his head and wrap it around his mouth.

Then he turned and went in.

Allie was alone watching a broken window. Then the ground floor exploded. She jumped to the wet grass with flames all over her and she rolled and rolled and rolled like they told her when she was a kid, when they were programming her. She stopped and saw that the upstairs was now engulfed in flames. She could hear sirens but they were feeble and far. The whole place was light. The fire had found some ferocious fuel within -- what, she could not guess -- and was transforming 'Totally Real' from within. And killing those two men.

She got to her car and drove north. What was she supposed to do about the

decisions of others?

--

The pizza was almost gone and Drake was getting anxious. He felt like any minute there was going to be a knock at the door.

There was a knock at the door. He didn't feel like he could answer it. "Could you get that please, hon?" he asked while he continued to chat to some wizard guy who was NOT invited and also to the yoga faculty, who had evolved way beyond loose fitting clothes even at social events.

Hannah did answer the door. She was a bit out of it; otherwise she would have at least thrown a small tantrum. Behind the door was an unexpected smile: Jack was here, with a bunch of flowers.

"Drake loves flowers," she deadpanned.

"These are for you," he answered. I never really thanked you for looking after Gav. Where is he?"

"He's in Lego wonderland in Violet's room. They're making a robot Barbie kind of thing."

"The marriage of great minds. Okay, I'll leave them alone for a bit. Did I miss the meeting?"

"Not really, he is still talking about macroeconomics or something. Anyway, come in. I thought you weren't coming?"

He came in and looked serious for a second. "I wanted to talk to you. I am closing up this chapter and I wanted to close up some things with you."

She felt a strange panic and a desire to run away from Jack. Thankfully a text message appeared and she had her phone dial tone set at a paranoiac sensitivity to text messages. If something cost 10 cents to send it was usually quite serious. She removed her phone from her EM shielded purse and started to make her way through the waves of menus.

"Go get some pizza before it goes!" she enthused.

Drake's eyes lit up when he saw Jack. He ran over and hugged him, for a long time. Jack smacked away at Drake's back, but the hug went on.

"Okay let's get started," Said Drake "Tonight we change our plans for the future. For various reasons, our financier has dropped out. Yeah... it was a shock. And looks like borrowing any more money is going to be impossible. But our San Diego facility can be profitable, with some austerity measures, which I want to outline tonight. Team, we are going to get through this. So let's hit the flipchart. Page 1: Complimentary Enemas..."

"Oh my Fucking God! DRAKE!"

A minute later Drake, Jack and Hannah were handing round a text message again and again, trying to read between the characters, little tea-leaves on the glass.

"TTLY REAL IS BURNING DOWN! I WAS DRIVING BY!!! MAYBE PEOPLE ARE IN IT!! IM LEAVING JACK AND THRWOING PHONE AWAY"

It was from Allie. Of course.

Jack was calm in a way that was so obviously deep shock that Hannah yelled to the blonde implant Yoga girl to make very sugary tea.

"Does she mean really on fire? She must mean... economically? Right?" said Jack from his haze.

Drake tried to have a really dumb look on his face. He looked over his shoulder at his faculty then imitated their livestock expression. "Well she says people are in it. It must be real. Let's get up there, fast. Shit! Adam!"

"Shit!" yelled Jack and the two ran out to Drake's Beemer. "Hannah! Please look after the kids and call 911!" yelled Jack.

For a childish moment, she wanted to jump in the car too. Then she lost her breath at the thought of Adam in the flames. She had a feeling that she had started this fire -- one way or another -- with her little non-committal tugs at the edges of brutal truth. She had been neither angel nor demon on this. And now sparks from hell and winds from heaven were burning mortal things.

A second personality activated while the first rolled up in a ball. A harsh business-like face escorted everyone off the premises and strictly but lovingly put the children into bed. She let them share the bed this night, since it was a special night. They chatted for a while but five minutes later she popped her head in and saw two peaceful blue glows: their night faces.

Jack and Drake ran up to black smoking wreckage. The free-standing little building was gone, as was one of the walls of the neighboring esthetician's office.

It stunned them. The firemen were standing around the wreckage with their hands on their hips, seemingly preparing to seal the deal by pissing on the embers.

Drake ran up to the fire chief and surprisingly clapped him on the back and shook his hand. Jack got to the wreckage.

"My friend! My friend might have been in there! He had a room there!"

"Whoa stay back," said a big hairy firefighter "tell me again? I thought this was a business?"

"It is but my buddy was just crashing here... for the night. You have to find him!"

"Sir, this building is gone. If your friend was in there... he couldn't survive. I'm sorry. But are you sure he was in there?"

"No."

"Try and call his friends, family etc. see if they have a location for him. When this cools, we'll start the investigation and see if we can recover anything. We'll know in a few hours if anyone was in there. You need to try and call around, okay? That's what you can do, sir."

Jack backed away. There was a black horror in front of him. There was a hole in front of him. He could not look away. And he could not help but wonder if They were right: if the universe did contain all things folded within it waiting for a human vision, including dark black holes that came to you when you said you were ready to move on. They came and wiped things away, and like a big dumb dog they were shocked when you did not celebrate their boisterous games.

Drake and the fire chief were talking and Jack started to hear it.

"So when are you going to make an honest girl out of my daughter, Drake?"

"As soon as I can, Chief! Of course all of this mess here with the paperwork for the insurance company is going to slow that down."

"Oh well, we can help you out with that! One thing I know is how to get that paperwork done."

"That would be a great help. So great."

"And Betsy tells me your divorce is almost finalized? It better be!!!"

"Practically wrapped up. It was a long separation: I was too soft, you know... I know that now. It was bad for both of us. And I want you to know something: after what I have learned I would not even think of marrying Betsy if I didn't have a whole different feeling inside me for your beautiful child than I had with my ex. Like you and Mary: life partners."

The creature had struck again. The Dark Penultimate, wiping the table clean for him, slave to his visualizations of a new life.

What had he done?

What had he done?

Chapter 19

Two weeks. That's a nice chunk of time. A lot can happen in two weeks.

No body was found in the remains of the school. The disappearing Marine had done it again. Jack waited to hear some kind of sign or message from Adam, but none came. That was a bummer. He felt like he owed him his life -- again -- even though he really didn't. But Adam's disappearance was a godsend for Drake and his new best buddy the fire chief. Disgruntled employee secretly sleeping at the office, torches the place and leaves town. Drake told Jack that he didn't want to mention the whole 'Marine war criminal' thing to anyone because it would complicate what was otherwise a very simple story. Jack was thoroughly in support of simplicity, and nodded quietly.

Drake was not a brave man when it came to personal matters so he indiscreetly left around some text messages, photographs and similar incriminating evidence about himself and his new equestrienne lover, Betsy. The night before he did it, he gamed out the chances of Hannah castrating or murdering him. He watched her slowly knitting and noted how much life had drained from her in the four days since the fire. Allie was gone, Adam was gone, money was thrown up and swirling in the air and it was very windy. It had hit her hard. With each stitch, each purl, each crochet or whatever, she seemed to sigh. Her eyes were fixed on nothing. The firm set of her eyes -- that sense of planning lunch while eating breakfast -- had gone. So he was feeling good about his chances and he set the trap.

She found the evidence the next day. She was surprised by the love she saw in the pictures, but not by the existence of an affair. When she saw how he was glowing with joy -- and she knew his every fake emotion all too well, even digitized -- she tied off the marriage with a tourniquet and spent an afternoon moving as much money as she could into her old bank account back in Chicago. That was all she wanted: some money. And of course, Violet. She knew that she would end up with Violet, despite how hard he might fight at first over custody. That would be just because he liked fighting and deals and not sharing things. So that would happen. And then, EXACTLY like a child with a toy he would get bored and would only come and check on Violet when he was drunk or otherwise emotionally stretched and refresh himself at the pool of youthful possibilities and unconditional love.

She played the game, because she wanted a simple conclusion. She didn't reveal that she saw through his scam, and she even yelled a bit. During the yelling some real emotion came -- actions make feelings -- and she almost lost control. But she remembered the feeling she got when she painted: the feeling that a single color was enough for a universe, that the real world was way overdone. She imagined a color that worked for her to live in. She visualized the color, precisely. Pure frequency, devoid of people and cars and blood. That was the secret.

He left, bemused but happy, sperm tingling in his balls. He was ready for the future. Betsy's uncle had this company out in Nevada that was doing space planes. He wanted a piece of that. And a son.

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Jack picked up the last mail before leaving. There was a postcard there from San Francisco, showing its beautiful skyline and the Transamerica Pyramid. He flipped it and read it. It was from Allie: he knew those loopy letter Ps.

"So. I guess everyone is alive. I am so happy SINCERELY. I love you, Jack. But you know it was not meant to be. I will miss you and I will miss Gavin. In a few years when we are all fully transformed. I will come back into his life if he wills it. I am psyched to be up here. I am ready for a future here full of life gratitude and success. Already I have met a nice older gentleman who is helping me navigate to an amazing full rich career. Jack: when we met you were a burned out rocker. Now you are a burned out man. Protect your soul."

He swallowed hard at the thought of the solid distance between the two of them. He saw her through a dark black glass. He saw her sliding away along a dimension that he could not navigate. Their beautiful son was evidence that once they had once lived in the same world.

"Hey Gav! ¡Vámanos, muchacho!"

Gavin came from the back yard holding a baseball bat. He knew only this place, and for him the scaly paint on the rickety fence was as absolute as gravity. He kind of understood what was going on: that Mom was on a long break, and that they were going to live in Mexico. Mexico, as he understood it, was the big country next door where everyone was Mexican.

He stood in the almost dead grass and looked at his bedroom window. It was strange not to see his robots looking at him. But they were in the car. So that was okay. He ran over and gave his Dad a big hug and he would probably never know how good that hug felt to his Dad. Then they got in the car. The Chinese woman from next door ran out and told his Dad that she always thought he was the not-crazy one and started crying but then she gave him a big Tupperware full of fancy noodles and rushed back to her house.

With a giving sound of gravel, they were gone.

--

Down in PB, Hannah was packing her last bag. Violet was running in the street like a dog and hopping and skipping too, from time to time. The Volvo pulled up. It was half full and half empty.

"So, we're going to do this?" asked Jack as he climbed out of the car. His dimples were knockout and she could admit that now. Because the kids were around, and still being phased into some things, she did not reach out and touch them.

"You betcha!" she said and vigorously went about loading bags in the Volvo. She was secretly glad they were going in the Volvo, because it looked less of a crime magnet than her Mercedes. Not that they were going to get robbed. They just had to make sure the kids peed now and did not need to get out in Tijuana and then they would be free and easy.

"And you're sure we don't need special permits to take the kids out of the country?" she asked.

"Nah," he said without stopping working -- because inside he still feared that any loss of momentum would collapse this miraculous bubble -- "for like 70 miles south of the border it still counts as America, I think."

She looked back at the house for a second after she strapped in the kids and then herself. It seemed strange that this was not the last time she would see it. That she would probably be bopping up and down for the next few months as they tried to sell it and as they built up their new home in Mexico and she brought down some of the things she treasured. It wasn't supposed to be like this, was it? It was supposed to be some big final gesture that cut you free from the burdens of your past. But she'd had enough of buildings burning down and thunderbolts coming through the cell phone.

"Here we go," said Jack "to a new... place. Same life, new place, new loves."

The word 'love' was born again in the front of the Volvo. They both blushed as they looked at each other and laughed when they saw and felt the blushes.

"Simultaneous blushes!" she said, "Good sign!"

They got on the 5 and headed south. Normally you peeled away from the border at the last moment, but not today. They kept going past the many war ships in the big bay, past the concrete beaches, past the white rainbow bridge, past the United States of America. For such a big fucking deal, it was surprisingly easy to leave.

They left behind the border and they avoided TJ city. Just at the edge of sight

was the road going the other way. Slow like syrup, and well served by Madonna vendors and squeegee boys, were many people heading for the American Dream. And of course, there were others who just wanted to get home with their prescription meds and gleaming Tijuana White Smiles.

Hannah and Jack were cruising now. By the edge of the ocean, the very look of the highway was foreign and exciting. Things like the little rocks at the side of the road bubbled with novelty. The ocean was as blue as the back of a shark and streaked by with appropriate speed. Everything felt faster, easier. This was possibly due to the metric system. They were cruising at 110.

The radio was losing its ability to speak English, and occasionally even burst into Mariachi song. It gave one last message before it went.

"Coast Guard officials are reporting that the skeletal remains found by a diver off the coast of Long Beach are indeed those of missing Marine Bryan Jenkins who had been on the run for almost a year after his escape from Camp Pendleton Marine base where he faced charges of... in Iraq... remains are at least six months old..."

Then it was gone. "Well fancy that," said Jack and he said it in such a bizarre way that they both just had to laugh. What could you do? What was the lesson to learn? There were some things that didn't repeat and if you survived them, then you were done: like chickenpox. This was one such thing.

In the back seat the kids had been happily babbling away in their little nonsense language for a while.

"Hey," he said to Hannah, "I've been wondering about that language. You think it is for real or are they just pretending?"

Hannah looked at him. Her hair was red, her freckles were brown, her smile was flat but not forgotten. "From now on," she said, "let's just pretend everything is pretend."

And they did.

THE END

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